

# PLENTY

At the weekly market, the farmers — Sarah guesses that's what she should call them — who sell goat cheese, and some weeks milk in squared-off, old-fashioned bottles, and tomatoes, tomatoes, always tomatoes, are years younger than she is. They have tiny tattoos on their biceps and ankles. They're mostly not pierced, at least not on any part of them that Audrey, holding tightly to her hand as they walk from one vender's table to the next, might comment on later in the afternoon, when she'll sit at the kitchen counter watching Sarah shake a colander of the market's costly bounty in the sink.

The farmers look nothing like farmers in the picture books Audrey begs Sarah to read every night before bed; nothing like the farmers Sarah's grandmother reminisced about in Sarah's own childhood. Those farmers were salt of the earth. When these farmers wear overalls, their intent is ironic.

Gotta be, she thinks, hesitating in front of a table heaped with tomatoes and shitake mushrooms. The farmer standing behind it is bare-armed and shirtless under the blue bibbed front of his overalls. At her glance, he pushes his straw hat to the back of his head.

"Naked." Audrey eyes him approvingly.

Sarah bends, to shush her. The tomatoes on the table in front of him are a waxy deep red, perfectly round. The big-shouldered globes of the Brandywines are cracked concentrically by heat, almost too ripe. The farmer smells of sweat. The asphalt parking lot shimmers with heat. It's the middle of August, dog days; everyone smells of sweat, at least a little. Audrey, still little enough to beg to be hoisted up and settled against Sarah's hip, presses her nose to Sarah's neck as soon as she lifts her and tells her she smells. Audrey wrinkles her forehead and thinks — of mowing the grass, she decides.

Sarah shifts the weight of her daughter's body and the woven net bags that drag down her shoulder, weighty with produce, and yanks the leash in her other hand. "One last walk through, OK?"

But behind them, Tucker has lowered himself to the pavement in front of another vender, one so baby-faced Sarah can't help but think of him as a boy. Vegetables are piled on the table in front of him — crooknecked squash and eggplants, and at the side, three pint cartons spilling over with figs. Tucker looks up, tongue lolling; lets his tail fan the air slowly.

Sarah sets down Audrey and walks back. "What kind are they?" She gestures at the boxes arranged on the table.

There are faint downy hairs above the boy's lip; his reddish crinkled hair is caught back in a sloppy ponytail. "Dunno." He stoops to give Tucker a pat. "They came with the place. When we bought it."

"Are they sweet?"

Her grandmother always said figs were mealy unless they were picked at their ripest, once they wept milk and crystalline sugar. It's something Sarah hadn't realized she'd known but suddenly remembers.

"Not real sweet," he says slowly, sweetly, straightening. The woman

sitting on the closed Igloo cooler behind him frowns and tilts her face toward the baby wrapped on her chest.

Sarah reaches for Audrey's hand. "Not this week," she says regretfully. "I don't know if my daughter would eat them."

"I think they're sweet." The voice of the woman sitting on the cooler is loud as they turn away.

"Don't breathe on all the bread," Sarah reminds Audrey as they approach the next table.

"Ma'am?"

It's the boy with the figs, holding out a rumpled paper bag. "They're really pretty sweet. A bag's only five dollars. Try one." He smiles at her.

They aren't sweet at all. But she already reached her hand into the bag, and behind him, the girl with the baby is watching.

She takes the figs; juggling the strap of Tucker's leash and her bags, she counts out five one-dollar bills.

She tells herself that nobody — besides her daughter, who is too young to add — needs to know what she just spent for the sort of fruit that falls to the ground between their house and their neighbor's, unlovely and unloved.

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Most of the time, Audrey can be coaxed into helping in the kitchen with measurements. She lobbies to dip teaspoons into the canister of sugar; to scoop drifts of flour with a cup. But the fig Sarah bribed her into sitting still for is untouched by the alchemy of leavening and heat so much more fascinating to somebody who is four years old. She sits at the kitchen counter, swinging her feet, neatly nipping the flesh from each rosy quarter with her teeth. Whether the figs are sweet or not sweet, she doesn't say.

"Can I go outside now?" she asks instead. She climbs down from her stool and skirts Tucker on the kitchen floor at her feet.

Sarah cups another fig in her hand and draws the paring knife toward her thumb. "Just keep an eye out."

It's what she has gotten into the habit of saying, instead of be careful. The wooden steps that lead down into the back yard are slicked by long use. The brick walkway at their bottom buckles after another dry summer. The oak tree at the edge of the yard leans aslant; drops dead branches while they're sleeping. Audrey is usually the one to find them when she heads outside in the morning.

All of these things are chores John says he'll see to when he has time. Neither of them add what crosses their minds: if he gets laid off. Repaired, fixed, gutted, he had ticked off when they saw the house for the first time, four years ago, at the height of the market. The house was a good deal.

She reaches for the cruets stood up on the counter. Good bones, she'd agreed when they walked into the back yard the first time, the realtor standing

deferentially behind them. Sensing their interest, she'd already pointed out the way the mailbox planted out front at the curb was completely unblotched by the silver camouflage they'd seen everywhere else, of graffiti.

Sarah sets down her knife. "Keep an eye out, o.k.?" she says again at the back door. Tucker scrambles up at the sound of her voice.

Who lives next door? she'd asked the realtor when they stood in the back yard. The chainlink fence between the two properties had incised painful argyles into the trunk of the enormous bush that grew there. She eyed the house that sat behind its branches; a dingy curtain in one window twitched.

She doesn't like to leave Audrey in the yard by herself. She starts down the stairs. Audrey is steadying the swing hung from the oak tree with one hand, pulling herself up until she can balance on the seat.

"Look," she crows. To Sarah, to the sky. The swing scythes toward the house and back. A flurry of wings rises from the fig tree.

The day Sarah and John moved in, the fig tree's branches had overwhelmed the space between the two houses, as heavy with fruit as Sarah was at that second heavy with child. I'll offer to mow the grass, she had thought, dropping a cardboard box on the kitchen counter. She peered out the kitchen window at the house next door. She'd buy a black-speckled enameled pot; the kind her grandmother had had. A dozen Mason jars for the fruit she'd get the chance to pick and preserve in exchange. The results would look beautiful, lined up in rows in the pantry.

She ducks out of the swing's backward trajectory. A mockingbird lights on the sag of the phone line. Figs litter the ground on either side of the fence. Overripe, blemished by teethmarks.

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"Remember when we picked blueberries?" she says to John at dinner, running a hunk of bread around the rim of her plate. "We ought to do that again."

They had driven out of town on a Sunday afternoon when she was ungainly with the girth that was about to be Audrey, and then the two of them had fanned out along the straggling rows, greedy to fill their pails with the biggest berries.

"I remember that," Audrey interrupts. She drums her feet against her chair rung.

"The place where we both got poison ivy?" John asks. "The place with that guy?"

"I remember!" Audrey says.

"No, sweetie." John turns to her. "You weren't even born yet."

"What guy?" Sarah asks. "We got poison ivy?"

"The guy with the guitar."

And then she remembers. The guy who sat in the shade by the rows of bushes while the two of them picked, idly playing a flat-top guitar. Its varnish had been worn away from too much strumming.

“I made jam. All those berries!” She stands up and squeezes behind Audrey’s chair.

“All that jam we never ended up eating,” John reminds her.

She carries her plate to the kitchen. “You were just about to be born,” she calls to Audrey. “A day or two later.” She had already started her maternity leave, but the baby, caring nothing about calendars, hadn’t chosen to arrive yet.

“Bet he’s toast now,” John says. “That guy with the guitar. Four years of drought since then.”

“Maybe not.” Sarah plunges her hands into the soapy foam in the sink. “There’re farmer’s markets all over town now.”

That day when she and John went blueberry picking, the sky overhead had felt like breath held in expectation, pale and heat-bleached. When they finished, the farmer set aside his guitar and poured the plump beads of their berries into the scoop of the scale on the table beside him.

“There’s another new vender at the market.” She shakes her hands free of suds. “And the shitake guy said next spring he’s going out in the woods, to look for morels.” She walks back into the dining room. “I never even knew you could do that! I wonder how they taste.”

“Morels.” John repeats. “Is this that same guy who told you he was going to make wine from his muscadines, or somebody else?”

“Never eat mushrooms you find,” she tells Audrey. “The guy with the grapes quit showing up.”

“See,” John says. “Toast. I told you!”

When Sarah lifts Audrey out of her chair, her daughter wraps her arms and legs around her waist. All those years ago, when the guy with the guitar at the blueberry farm had handed back her change, his fingers had been stained up to the first knuckle with blueberry juice. And then, on the drive home, she and John had had their first real argument — over how easy or hard it might be, to defer one’s student loans, or wear faded overalls, or be a gentleman farmer.

The next morning, she had cooked down the berries while John was at work, with a recipe she’d kept when she cleaned out her grandmother’s house, spidery handwriting on a stained index card. She tilted it on the counter and set to work. *Eva’s Blueberry Jam*, it proclaimed, and in the right-hand margin: *the best Edward says he ever tasted! Who was Eva? Edward?* The house filled up with the smell of hot sugar, like a fairground.

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The chainlink fence around the house was another thing, John had whispered in her ear when they stood in front of it for the first time, another thing that’d have to go.

After they moved in, he proposed a picket fence to their neighbor as a replacement. They’d pay for it themselves. It never occurred to either one of them that she would say no.

Now, the chainlink fence weeps more rust than it had then and not even the fact that Sarah always adds a polite Miss to their neighbor's last name will ever redeem her. She stands in the back yard in the dark, watching Tucker nose his way along the fence. Overhead, the sky casts back on the city its pink-tinged, night-time glow. Inside the house, Audrey is tucked at last beneath her down comforter in the room Sarah painted as creamily white-and-blue as Delft porcelain, back when she still wanted — what exactly had she wanted then? A faint breeze blows the musty smell of the fig tree toward her.

Just a couple of weeks ago there were no figs. Now there are too many. The birds can't keep up. Whenever Sarah goes into the yard, she can smell the fermenting fruit. She pictures the figs seasoned by the sorts of old-fashioned spices no one even likes anymore, allspice and vinegar, and the look the round seed-tick pearls of mustard seed would have, suspended in glass jars in the pantry.

"She's asleep, I think," John says, coming down the back steps toward her. "Finally." He slips an arm around her waist.

"How was work?" she asks.

"It was work. You know."

As she snaps her fingers to call Tucker back into the light, a light flashes next door. "What good does it do her?" she asks, watching it. "To tell us no. She never eats them."

"Eat what?"

"All those figs!"

"We got enough to have for supper," he points out. "I'm not so sure I want any more."

"Those weren't hers. I got those at the farmer's market." She pauses. "Just to see. But they didn't taste like I remember."

"Maybe there's a reason you can't get them at the store."

From the back yard it's still possible to glimpse the elegant Tilt-A-Whirl of lights from downtown, the view that was one of the main reasons they purchased the house in the first place. Or so they told themselves at the time, to distract themselves from the fact that in the living room of the house they were about to buy, a ghostly outline was all that remained of the mantel.

Tucker sidles into the light, the flag of his tail drooping. "You can't buy them," she says. "They're too unforgiving."

At the sharpness in her voice, Tucker opens his mouth; a convulsive gesture, half cough, half yawn. He growls, the barely-there rumble he usually reserves for slippers, for tennis balls, for sticks he wedges between his front paws. John cautiously extends the tip of a shoe.

When they moved into the house, they made lists. Things to fix, rooms to paint. She marked off garden beds in the one sunny space in the back yard, right along the fence. On weekends, John rolled up his sleeves and turned up the dirt with the slice of a spade. Being pregnant made it hard for her to bend over to dig in their saved parings and eggshells.

The things he uncovered in the dirt still sit in a saucer on the windowsill in the kitchen. Sparkplugs, a shotgun shell, twisted wires. Marbles.

She made him throw out the glass eye.

Tucker's tail inscribes a tentative arc. He looks from one of them to the other, then noses the object he let fall to the ground.

"A glove," John says finally. "I think."

Stiffened, blackened, root and clod: in the half-dark it lies on the ground, its leathery fingers curled into a fist.

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On the other side of the fence, the grass is always knee-high. A bright swath of green in spring; by now turned yellow. Fall is just around the corner. Before long, Sarah will have to kneel just inside the back door to button Audrey into her jacket. But for now, when Audrey patrols the back yard, the knots of her vertebrae are bared by her sundress. Sarah sits in the early-morning sun on the back steps and watches her, her skirt tucked against her calves.

"Look," Audrey calls.

"I'm looking." Sarah raises her coffee cup to her lips. All she's really doing is taking stock of the overcast sky. At the edge of the yard, morning glories climb hand over hand up a section of chainlink. At the sound of her voice, Tucker raises his head to look at her and then bends his body in an almost-impossible curve, settling himself in the flower bed with a sigh.

When exactly did Tucker stop being the tawny retriever puppy two lovebirds rescued from the pound a year after college? Now he requires coaxing and cleaning up after, the same sorts of things Audrey does.

"Look," Audrey calls again.

She stands up and starts down the stairs. "They have little hats," Audrey adds as she squats down. She raises the tunnel of her cupped hands to her mother's eye. "Who makes them?"

It's true, Sarah realizes, gently pushing the hand away from her face. The acorns have hard scornful little faces. They sit stolidly beneath the thatch of their caps. She grinds piles of them to powder under the tires of the car whenever she backs it out of the driveway.

What's the old wives' tale? John had reminded her of it just the other day. The more acorns there are, the harder the winter. "No one," she says. "No one makes them. They just grow like that."

Audrey slips the cap off the top of an acorn, then back on. "Look," she says again. "They're like little cups. You could drink tea from them. Help me find more!"

Sarah crouches and feels for acorns in the grass. One, two, three. She puts each one into Audrey's hands.

"Too many for me to hold," Audrey observes. "But I'm going to keep them!" She stoops under the fig tree's overhanging branches and reaches out to sweep the ground clear. "This is my house," she sings out. She pats the ground beside her. "Come in and sit down!"

Who even really likes figs? Sarah wonders, ducking her head to avoid a branch. Until she spotted them at the farmer's market, she'd thought nobody, not anymore. Their neighbor leaves them to the possum John has decided must be the thing that draws Tucker toward her yard like a magnet.

Wasps are walking the cracks in the largest, overripe ones overhead.

She stands beside the fence, slipping off one sandal, putting her bare toes to the heel of the other. Behind her, she can hear the jingle of Tucker's collar. "Why?" Audrey asks, staring up at her. "Mama, why are you taking your shoes off?"

She wraps her fingers around the chainlink. Shakes it gently. "Sssh." She jams as much as she can of one foot into the space between two twists of wire.

The preserves she made when she was pregnant — what were they but something to fill the last few days between one life and the next? The knife blade had slipped too easily between the glass rim and rubber seal by the time they got around to opening the first jar. The contents looked fine but — who could tell? It was safest to dump it all down the drain.

Testing the fence for her weight, she gains purchase and steps up.

Tucker is suddenly right there at her heel. "Why?" Audrey cranes her head backward.

Sarah scrambles out of the dog's reach. Toes wedged into the chainlink, legs braced against its webbing, she parts the leaves.

The figs dangle just out of her reach. Like sunlight preserved behind a wax seal, something to dig a spoon into and eat voluptuously, at leisure. She holds onto the top of the fence with one hand and leans out. Below her, Tucker begins to bark, on and on, as if she were a thief.