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How a Watermelon Saved My Life

by Suzanne Picard

Who gets married in August in Washington? Cicadas drone louder than conversations. Mosquitoes feast on any exposed skin. The air is so swampy that breathing gets tiresome.

I raised these arguments with Jessica, but she and Nancy were adamant. Thus it was that two days before the big event, a late August whim found me in the dappled shade of the new farmer's produce stand on East-West Highway. I chose a ten-pound watermelon, slightly ovoid, as grassy-green as the bridesmaids' dresses.

When I pulled in front of the future in-laws' house with my prize, I noted the Camrys with Pennsylvania plates baking in their driveway and thought *Pittsburgh cousins*. Two days early, it couldn't belong to the former boyfriend, currently a U-Penn pediatrics resident. That had been another argument—why should Jessie's ex get an invite?—Nancy took my side on that one, but Jessie cradled her arms and rocked an invisible baby and pleaded: *he'll come back to Washington and we'll have an inside connection to a smart pediatrician*.

I was irritated but flexed my biceps and joked about how she wanted to show me off. *Who needs a doctor when you can have a rock-climbing instructor?* Nancy laughed, although Jess only blushed, and maybe I should have known then I was in trouble.

"Check it out." I walked into the kitchen holding the melon aloft for Nancy's admiration. "I thought we could spike it for the barbecue tonight." My mother-in-law-to-be was an ex-hippy with a gray braid down her back, and I didn't doubt her approval. "Where's Jess?" Still cradling the watermelon, I gave Nancy a peck on the cheek and headed out to the back deck overlooking the pool. Nancy put a restraining hand on my arm, which I took for a desire to grab the melon and start injecting it with Stolichnaya. Proud of the thing—it reminded me of drunken summer parties in my early

twenties—I needed Jessie's admiration first.

I pounded down the stairs to the pool. The wedding-planner book, several towels, nail polish bottles, sunscreen, and huge plastic cups with melting ice littered the lounge chairs. I felt a rush of desire for my bossy, small-boned, finger- and toenail-painted fiancée and jogged the garden path to the outdoor shower stall, enclosed on three sides and open on the fourth to Nancy's hibiscus and butterfly bushes. Imagining her wedding gown décolletage and garter-belt-encircled thigh, I pushed through the cicadas' din, failing to differentiate groaning from droning until too late, not until I came upon their profiles, a crescent moon of Jessie's, the same peachy color as the watermelon's sunspot, and the man's open mouth as he grabbed her hips and pumped from behind. I stared at his size and raw meat color in spite of the silent scream—*don't look, don't look*—pulsing through me. My body tensed as if I were the one about to climax. The watermelon hovered above my head, and I was already seeing brains and black seeds on the slick blue tiles. I don't remember backing away and lowering the melon, but as I returned to the house, I was clutching it to my abdomen, where it managed to hold in place my eviscerated guts.

Nancy gasped when she saw my face and followed me past the dining room table with its display of Belgian waffle makers, blenders, toasters, coffee grinders, panini makers, electric mixers: absurd, enraging items for someone who would never eat again. "I told her to send him away." Nancy sounded desperate. "He's not welcome. I'll go—"

"Too late." I transferred the melon to one arm so I could pick up the Stoli from the bar. Looking hopeful, Nancy took the bottle from me, unscrewed the top, then reached for the melon. But I shook my head and reclaimed the bottle, upending it into my mouth, needing it before my muscles began to



shake from the adrenaline hit. "I'll take...the Stoli... the rest—" I indicated the table "...you'll figure... what to do." When Nancy's face dissolved into tears, she looked so much like Jess that I had to sprint for the door.

I drove with that watermelon in my lap through Maryland and Pennsylvania. In Dayton, Ohio, I set it aside, cradling it in a bed of chalk bags and climbing ropes between the front seats. I locked it in the car and got out to see the bicycle shop where the Wright Brothers had dreamed up flying machines. Between Dayton and Springfield, Illinois, I drove with my left hand and touched the melon with my right. Once during that stretch, I dozed off for an instant—*life can change in an instant*—and had to swing the wheel hard to get back on the road. The melon rolled off its bed, banging against a carabiner and nicking its previously unblemished rind. When I returned to the car after paying hom-

age in Springfield, standing in the spot where the Great Emancipator said *I now leave, not knowing when, or whether ever, I may return*, the car smelled sweet-and-sour, vinegary, as if the watermelon wanted to spike itself. I urged it to hang on until the Rockies. But even with the windows rolled down, somewhere along the Arkansas River, the stink and my misery made me gag.

I swerved to the berm near a pumpkin patch on an early September, circle-of-life whim. I walked into the field, hoisted the oozing melon over my head, and smashed it down next to a green-striped pumpkin. It burst like fireworks, splattering the vines, my T-shirt, shorts and bare legs. With bowed head, I waited until the first fly alighted on a piece of moldering rind and the last of its juice seeped into the ground.

