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The Food Bank

by Suzanne Walsh

I'd only been down to the food bank on one other occasion. It was a basket of mixed reactions—gratitude and humiliation dominated; disappointment and frustration layered themselves thinly behind necessity, not to mention guilt. Yes, the guilt based on the belief that the truly, truly desperate wouldn't have those other emotions. The food bank was in a small wooden annex to some city building. I stood in line, the late morning sun warming my sense of displacement. The lady behind the desk asked my name and if I'd ever been there before. I practically whispered my name, "Eliza Jackson," and muttered a muted "Yes." I showed her my ID.

They take down your name so as to prevent people from going through more than once. The fellow behind me, also in his mid-twenties, was clearly a regular. He was bursting with cheer. "Hey ladies," he said through my back, "anything special this week? Any of those fresh apples left?" His lightness bounced around the room, finding cracks to shine through.

I thought I was portraying a decent mood until I found myself an impenetrable shadow slinking to the first counter. "Meat or fish, hamburger or canned tuna?" asked the portly woman with no expression.

"Meat, please," I answered. She handed me a cellophane-wrapped blob of ground beef which I plopped into the plastic bag I'd been given. I'd have preferred tuna but knew the kids would like the hamburger. I knew I couldn't have both because last time I'd been a real pain by asking for half and half. "We leave the tuna for those who are real vegetarians," she'd said.

Today, she turned toward the light, and her voice took on a singsong quality, "Odey, now you know if you want the good stuff, you've got to come early."

"I thought you'd save me some." He opened his arms palms up in expectation.

"First come, first served, sweetie," came her contralto reply.

I stood looking around. Where to next? The bread box or the vegetable bin? The vegetable bin had a mix of potatoes and carrots, so few that I could see the bottom of the box. There was a self-serve plastic bag at the side, but I knew I was being watched. The rumble of rooting around echoed my own discomfort. I grabbed four of the giant horse carrots and four potatoes, leaving about the same in the box. I glanced behind myself self-consciously as I felt someone near. I saw now what I hadn't noticed before—sunshine Odey was in fact Odey Durns, who had grown up two streets over from me in our middle-class suburb back east. I straightened and looked harder, his face melting in and out of the teenage mold that had been set in my memory. He looked back, head cocked to one side.

We both said at the same time, "Are you..." and then stopped to let the other continue. I went first. "Aren't you Odey Durns who used to live on Bellevue?"

"And you're Little Elli Jackson, aren't you?"

We both paused for a moment, smiling. For me it was a long moment of recognizing where we were. A moment of wanting to say, "What the hell happened to you?" Here we were in the club of those incapable of feeding themselves (temporarily at least, I told myself).

"How's your sister? Eleanor, wasn't it?" I faked a bit of bad memory. I knew full well it was Eleanor. Ellawhore, duh! She was jeered at. The kind of girl, older than us, who held her nose jumping off the low board at the pool and entered the water knees bent and flatfooted. The kind that didn't fit, that served as a warning to us younger ones as to the potential social torment that might await if you



weren't paying attention. Oh God, did he think I was one of the ones jeering and am now getting my just deserts foraging in dim lighting for roots?

"She's good. Married, living in Ontario," he smiled.

I nodded. "Good, good. Any kids?"

"Yeah, she has two boys."

Right, of course people don't stay trapped in an awkward midair stance for life; they move on and become accepted into gentler circumstances. Some people, anyway. Odey was always kind of cool; he seemed to think the food bank was where it was at these days. I was frozen in between torture and envy. "What about you? Do you have kids?" Throughout this exchange the question as to why he was here hung in my mind, and I thought he must be wondering the same about me. This was not exactly the trip to Europe or university education our neighborhood had promised. But if it even occurred to him there was no sign.

"Yup, I have three," he beamed.

"Me too," I added. I then became very interested in what was in the bags, seemingly assessing my take for the week, feeling a little shy.

"Listen," continued Odey, "there are other food banks around, you know. Uh huh, they are open on different days. If you make the rounds you can actually get some good stuff. That's why I'm late here; I had the days mixed up. You really do have to come early to get the good stuff."

"I don't want to sound ungrateful, but what is the 'good stuff'?" I croaked through a half smile.

"Oh, some fresher bread and more choice in the canned soups, more fruit and veg. The veg don't keep, so they don't get much, y'know."

I was transported out of embarrassment and into the present. Odey's knowledge of these survival techniques had unhumiliated me as I made mental note of potential food sources.

He smiled, he laughed, the old neighborhood vanished like a veneer, and we were the real unvarnished wood underneath. I might as well be here if I'm here, I thought, but being raw wood left me somewhat vulnerable.

We never mentioned the circumstances that led either of us to meet, and when we parted it was in a lighthearted, "See you around" kind of way. I wanted to run away from Odey and the charity schedule. I wanted to buy albacore tuna without a fiscal dilemma. I found myself refusing to be comfortable.

When I came back the following week, I looked for him, the smattering of the familiar, the doorway to acceptance. I began to emulate his demeanour. The shackles of pride that had been so heavy were unlocked for me—unlocked by the brother of Eleanor Durn, Ellawhore, for whom I'd once felt sorry. Here was food for the taking; yeah, so beggars can't be choosers, but the misery is optional. This isn't Africa, after all.

"Hey Lorna, any fresh fruit left?" I practically hummed. I was met with a blank stare; I clearly didn't have Odey's charm. I couldn't even pull off the food bank without looking like a misfit.

Then, there she was, right there with me, the ghost of pre-splash Eleanor Durn, hovering over the water after springing off the board, a little dribble of added spittle for dramatic effect, staring blankly as she always seemed to, not even alarmed at her condition. I took her aside midair and said, "It might go better if you point your toes, straighten your legs and back, and don't pull your bikini up to your armpits." But no, that wasn't quite right. Maybe I'll just say "hi" and try not to be afraid it's catching. No, "hi" seemed glib. Finally I did my own midair rendition of the funky chicken with complete abandon, as gangly and joyful as I could manage.

Amid the sound of the water blasting open, I heard a faint voice when I surfaced, alone again and gradually focused; Lorna the food bank lady was speaking. "You know what, dear; we just might have some nice crisp apples." I think I saw a wink. I wiped the water from my eyes and came up for air.

"That would be great! It's a perfect day for apples."

