

Lancaster Best

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I read once that more than seeing, hearing, touching or tasting, our sense of smell offers us the most direct route to our past. Therefore, I hope it doesn't sound so strange to you that whenever the scent of sharp provolone cheese reaches me, with its rich, musty, locked-away-and-forgotten aroma, I am eighteen again and madly in love.

The first time I saw her she was walking with two other girls. They may have been her sisters; it was hard to tell by the way they smiled at each other, speaking softly and dressed the same. I was busy slicing sharp provolone and the lunch rush was in full bloom.

"C'mon, Bri, move it! We got sandwiches to make!" my boss, Vinnie, bellowed as he began scooping out the long rolls with his thick fingers and sliding them to me. I heard Paul working the register and taking the drink orders. I blinked and began moving the blade again as the cheese piled into my waiting hand.

She wore a gauzy white cap with two strings that trailed downward and caressed her cheeks. As she passed, taking no notice of me whatsoever, I caught the color in her hair and the word 'russet' instantly came to mind. Then I saw the suggestion of curls and pictured them loosed and spilling down to her shoulders in long, gentle rings. Her mouth was framed by full lips and I took notice that the bottom one was slightly more pronounced; she unknowingly offered a voluptuous view when I saw her bite it in an effort to quell a giggle from something one of the other girls had said to her.

I may have stopped breathing, I'm not sure, but the sounds around me seemed muted and distant. Her nose was small and graceful. I saw dimples on her cheeks that hid themselves as her smile retreated. Her skin was bright and she had soft, small, brows above dark eyes that danced in the light. The line of her jaw against her skin was so delicate it could have been a brushstroke.

The two girls huddled with her, one on either side (making me think of maidens escorting and acting as protectors to shy away would-be suitors), wore the same soft looking caps on their heads. Though their dresses were of a different color - the girl on the left was wearing a light green and the one on the right wearing a deep gray - they matched the cut of

her muted, hushed blue. All wore formless skirts that ran to the ankles and all I could see other than their faces were their hands poking out from the long sleeves and the plain black shoes on their feet.

I strained to hear her voice to complete the portrait before me but the ramblings of the customers combined with the protests of the register and the shouts of the order takers clouded my hopes of hearing a word from her lips.

I was barely able to pull my eyes from her. I quickly placed the remaining cheese in the refrigerator and turned back but in that short span she had been swallowed by the noon time feeding frenzy.

I managed to get through the lunch rush with only a few mistakes, but, to be fair; I was still new at Dominic's Subs and Steaks at The Market. Still, I couldn't get her out of my mind; I found her invading my thoughts unannounced, intruding and scrambling what little was organized in there. I kept glancing up from the slicer, hoping to find her walking across the floor again. Maybe then I could put together more pieces of the puzzle that she had suddenly become to me. I had had crushes before, one particularly searing one in high school, but even that could not compare. I had been hit by a bolt of lightning the minute I saw her and the unbearable urge came over me to make sure that her presence wasn't a singular act in my life.

The Market was an enormous, roofed food and craft center in the middle of the city. It had existed for over fifty years in some form or another, sometimes changing ownership and sometimes losing merchants and gaining new ones but it had been open every day for forty-seven years. There were over a hundred merchants, serving hot and cold sandwiches, fresh fish, fruit and vegetables, flowers, used books, kitchen utensils, exotic coffees and teas, sushi, pastries and meats.

There were five Amish counters in The Market and they sold freshly made sausages, pickles and lunchmeats. A couple also sold cakes and other bakery items as well as warm pretzels sprinkled with various toppings and funnel cake, powdered pure white with fine sugar.

I spent my short lunch break winding through the corridors between the vendors, heading to where I hoped to find her.

I reached the Amish vendors and tried to look interested in buying. I was asked a couple of times whether I needed any help but, not seeing her, I politely refused and moved

on to the next. The women, especially the older ones, were quiet and when they spoke it was soft. The men were, for the most part, stern-looking and stoic, the older ones sporting bushy gray beards.

I was unsuccessful at all the counters and my mood turned sour as I made my way slowly back to Domenic's.

"Aren't they the ones that have, like, given up taking baths or something?" Paul asked me later as we smoked cigarettes out near the loading docks. I shook my head, deciding not to tell him he was being ignorant.

What picked at me, what thoroughly confused me about the whole thing was that apparently nobody else had seen this girl. Paul asked me to describe her but I couldn't find the right words; everything about her seemed to be elusive. I even found myself having a hard time clearly picturing her, like she was a fading dream after a long sleep. I used my hands, as if I was molding her face out of clay, fumbling with words and sounding childish.

"Big tits?" he asked and took a last drag off his Newport.

I blew out a breath of gray and shook my head again. "I didn't notice."

He dropped his cigarette and stubbed it out with the toe of his sneaker, making a dismissive sound with his lips before going back inside.

For the rest of the day her image was with me: the peek of red gold hair just visible under her bonnet, her almond-shaped eyes and how they addressed everything as new and exciting. Her smooth, pure skin and the daring curve of her throat as it buried itself under the neckline of her dress.

I didn't see her again until the end of the week, and it was, again, during the noon crush of a hungry mob. She was by herself this time and she wore a dark brown dress of the same style as before. She was carrying a canvas tote bag and moved swiftly, as if a goal waited at the end of her travels, and I nearly panicked as she became once again blended in with the shoppers. In a move of desperation I leaned into Vinnie and whispered that I felt sick.

"What? You gotta be kiddin' me or something, right?" He was busy working the rolls; filling the sandwiches with lettuce, tomatoes and oil, then layering slices of prosciutto, sharp provi and capicola on top. He moved quickly and didn't look at me, instead reaching for the sliced tomatoes and then sliding the sandwiches across the counter to Paul who

wrapped them, taped them and shouted out the order number. He grabbed another long roll and sliced it.

I shook my head and tried to look as convincing as possible. I let out a low belch, a trick I've been able to do since I was a kid. "I mean it. I'm gonna throw up, man."

A disgusted look came over him and he shot back in a hoarse whisper to get out of there but to be back as soon as I was finished. I stumbled to add to the performance, then stripped off my apron and jogged out the door and into the mass of people. I pushed my way toward the restrooms until I felt I was out of view, then turned and headed in the direction that she went.

I skipped past waiting customers in front of Calypso Burger and wound my way around the line at Maki's Sushi but still hadn't seen her yet. I figured she must work here or be part of a family that owns a counter. Maybe she only worked a couple days a week or...

I saw her ahead of me and I abruptly slowed to a walk. She was moving past the African Arts Assembly kiosk and she stopped to look over some of the elegantly hand-carved animals. I watched her smile, the dimples showing themselves again, and I noticed a few faint freckles on her nose. She picked up a tiny giraffe and looked it over, turning it in her smooth hand.

"Rebecca! Come, we need you here!"

She turned quickly. A barrel-chested man with a gray beard and no moustache had called to her in a pleasant, if thoroughly authoritative, voice. He was standing behind the counter of Lancaster Best and was wrapping something in brown paper that I could not see. His lips were thin and drew a straight line across his face. Two older women, wearing white bonnets like hers, and a couple of young girls were busy helping the customers.

One of girls shouted in a clear, cracked voice. "Becca, come here, please!"

She placed the miniature animal back on the shelf before quickly moving to the counter. I stood and watched as she gathered an apron, tied it behind her back, and approached the next customer in line. She moved gracefully. She helped one of the younger girls place more meat into the cool display case and she did it with a whisper of a smile still on her lips, as if she was thinking of a funny moment earlier in the day.

I watched from a distance for another few minutes as she was taken aside by one of the women, a very plain, black-haired woman. The smile washed away. She nodded, very business-like, as the woman pointed back toward the African Arts Assembly. She then wiped

her hands on her apron and returned to the business of cutting meat. Everything she did fascinated me and I had to force myself to return to Domenic's. I returned with the look of someone who was battling an upset stomach but it wasn't very difficult; it was already turning over at the very thought that she did in fact work at The Market and that, moreover, she now had a name.

Rebecca.

Every lunch break I had after that day was spent at the small counter of Chang's Noodles, sitting along with satisfied customers, absently adding hot sauce to my dish, and with a clear view of Lancaster Best. However, Rebecca was not there every day and I was only able to see her twice, on Wednesdays and Fridays. The infrequency only added a heavier weight to my stomach when she was absent and a lighter step to my feet when I saw her once again.

I watched as she joked with other merchants, mainly other Amish from nearby counters, and desperately wanted to hear what she thought was funny. On Wednesday she dressed in a rich blue dress with a white collar that covered her chest and I imagined that she wore it for my pleasure. I felt my breath leave my body when she laughed and then tried to contain her smile when the stone-faced man, who I figured must be her father, came by to see what she was up to. She had life and it thrilled me, even more so when she tried to hide it.

The people in the Amish corner had vitality. The very young were loud like all small children were, the adolescents brash and quick, much like every preteen I had ever known, and the near adults, like Rebecca and some of the young men in straw hats, were curious and rebellious, even if it was in a somewhat subdued and alien manner. I saw them play jokes with each other and make faces when the adults were not looking and then try to stifle giggles when the adults were near.

On Friday, I took the last five minutes of my lunch break and actually moved over to the Lancaster Best counter. I saw that on the sign, in smaller type I hadn't noticed before, were the words, "Owned and operated by the Lantz Family for 50 years". Rebecca, or I should say now, Rebecca Lantz, looked in my direction and offered a friendly smile and I think I may have returned it but I can't be sure. I panicked and quickly stooped to look at the various fresh meats (scrapple, ring bologna, salami and ham), the cheeses (Swiss,

Muenster, Havarti and goat) and the case of bakery items (something called friendship cake, strawberry tarts, corn muffins and blackberry and shoo-fly pies).

I finally caught my breath and when I stood up I was facing a young girl, perhaps twelve years old. She was smiling, patiently waiting and I could see a slight resemblance in the face to Rebecca.

“May I help you?” she asked in a squeaky voice that was misted with an accent. I hesitated, looking over to Rebecca, who was busy in conversation with another girl around her age.

I asked the girl, awkwardly, about the food before me, only half hearing the answers because I was consumed by watching Rebecca, fascinated by everything she did and unbelieving that a girl as beautiful as she could walk without a crowd of admiring men constantly around.

Maybe, I thought, that was the reason I was so swept up in her. She was beautiful, of course, but I was able to reason that not every man would collapse before her the way that I had. Obviously, some were even able speak to her without becoming tongue-tied and stammering away, but I was shaking just being this close to her. I couldn't believe the men who turned from her and then moved about their lives as if it hadn't been forever changed.

The polite girl, seeing no sale was coming, excused herself and moved on to the next customer. Rebecca was now waiting on a middle-aged woman who had a large shopping bag in each hand and was ordering with nods of her head.

I checked my watch, silently said goodbye to Rebecca and headed back to Dominic's to finish my shift.

On Saturday I made my way to the nearest bookstore and a pretty girl with round glasses helped me find some books on the Amish, or The Plain People, as I discovered they are sometimes called. I selected three books and sat outside, turning pages until my break was over.

I felt like a bit of an invader now and I imagined the book slamming shut in my hands and refusing to open, locking itself and its people's secrets from the outside. I already knew that they were a private people and that they tended to shy from the modern world.

Through the book, I learned that it was their belief that technology also brought with it the potential to divide families, separate relatives and create vanity, possibly the most horrific sin of all for them.

That night, as I read further, I became enveloped in the mystery that was Rebecca Lantz, her family, and what their life must be like. I thought it admirable that they stood so strongly by their beliefs and that they guided them through the modern world.

I thought of Rebecca, now in a new setting: sitting on a faded wooden porch, knitting or reading before a vast field of waving corn. I pictured silos and horses, running brooks and lanes with the deep tracks of wooden wheels embedded in the mud. Children played in a field and she looked up at them and smiled and then she was called into the white and gray house by her mother's voice. She smoothed her dress before getting up and going inside.

All that weekend I read about Rebecca's life and I found myself, crazily perhaps, but nevertheless, falling in love with her. It became an adoration of the most insane proportion. I tried to tell myself that it was a silly infatuation and almost convinced myself once or twice. And, though I could never truly be angry with her, there were times I felt blindsided and resented having my life routine twisted, alternately adoring her and then feeling helpless and weak. I realized that she didn't know me and in all likelihood never even thought about me, but she was always in my thoughts, connecting all of them like a silver thread. It didn't seem fair that I should carry the burden alone. I looked up at the sky and felt her spirit flying above me. I felt crazy. I was sick with love and I resolved to do something about it.

The following Wednesday I could honestly say to Vinnie that I was ill. I mixed up orders, spilled a customer's drink and generally wreaked havoc, but it was impossible to concentrate. She had consumed my mind for the entire week. She was only a half block from me but I felt her as if she were holding my hand, and, though she had never given me a glance that said anything more than I was simply a passing face in her world, she was taking up the whole of my life.

I watched the clock as my break neared and when I was free I walked briskly across The Market. I took no notice of the other customers and focused on the corner where the Amish were as if it was a beacon guiding me toward Rebecca. She didn't know my name yet, but she would. Somehow, today, she would.

Without slowing, I reached out and picked a bright yellow flower (I think it was a lily but I've never known much about flowers) from one of the pots in front of Maggie's Petals and spun around, telling her that I would be right back with some money. For some reason,

perhaps recognizing me from Dominic's, or because she saw something in my eyes just then, she simply smiled and nodded her head.

I couldn't slow down now. Rebecca was reeling me in and I felt both helpless and powerful. I wanted to fight her control yet I wanted to give up and be taken from the water, breathless and at her mercy.

I could hear my footsteps as I walked toward Lancaster Best. Although the afternoon lull had taken its place at this time of day, there were still a few customers about. I saw Rebecca taking an order from a curly-haired young man and the thought called out to me that I belonged in front of her, only me, and at exactly this moment.

Perhaps it was the deliberate way I was walking that drew her attention, for her eyes fell on me and I nearly froze. The rest of her family was busily moving back and forth but she was not; she watched me and I saw a slight curve to the corners of her mouth that drew me in closer. I slipped in between two waiting customers and stood before her, saying nothing but looking at her and breathing her in. She blinked at me, tilting her head and wearing a slightly puzzled and curious expression. I held the flower out and slowly raised it over the counter to her and she took it, looking first to it and then to me again. She smiled and blinked. I felt weak.

I took a deep breath and parted my lips, wonderfully unsure of what words were to come.

"Hi," I said. My voice was shaking. My brain locked momentarily and I stood dreamily before her, unable to continue.

Her smile widened as she stole a glance at her father and leaned in closer to me. Her eyes were dancing in the light.

"Hi," she whispered.