Strawberries

By Meredith Hutchins

On Monday I drove to the shopping center for groceries and stopped at the bookstore for a copy of the *Boston Globe.* It doesn't reach the little Maine coast village where I vacation until a day late.

Inside the store the air felt cool and smelled of paper and ink. I picked a newspaper off the pile on the floor below the magazine rack and went to wait at the cash register behind a tall tanned woman wearing white slacks. They reminded me of the cream I'd just bought and her red shirt and wide-brimmed straw hat, tied with a bright scarf, made me think of strawberries.

The woman hefted Sunday's *New York Times* onto the counter and extended a bill toward the clerk, who accepted it without a nod or a smile. She was as carefully put together as the woman she served. Lacquered hair, a gold chain and small gold earrings framed an impassive face, additionally protected by makeup.

As for me, I wore jeans and a polo shirt, a uniform of another sort. The three of us, all about the same vintage, were a study in contrasts, I thought, as the clerk counted the change from a five and, sunglasses lowered, the woman buying the *Times* hovered. "Are you sure that's right?" she said. "It's much more than I pay for the newspaper in New York."

"I can’t help that," the clerk said. "I only know what the papers cost here." And she turned her gaze in my direction, as if to say 'Let's see you try to make trouble.'

The woman scooped up the *Times* and balanced it on her left hip. "You people think you have to get everything you can out of us during the summer," she said and, unmindful of ink smudges, her white pants flashing, she scissored out the door.

Sorry to be next, I approached the clerk. "I don't have to put up with that," she said, and scowled at the rack of paperback books on the opposite wall of the store. "I just might take next summer off."

I clutched my newspaper defensively. It occurred to me to make a soothing remark, but I decided not to risk it. I suspected that, as far as the clerk was concerned, I wasn't that much different from her New York customer and I doubted she would be mollified to learn that I didn't mind paying extra for the *Globe* in Maine. She might sniff that she couldn't understand why I wanted to read it in the first place.

Emerging from the store onto a sidewalk that radiated noonday heat, I glimpsed the *New York Times* lady across the street as she slid into the driver's seat of a blood red Volvo.

I got into my own car and headed south on Route 3, the clerk still on my mind. I did not think she would quit her job at the bookstore. A year-round job in downeast Maine, where she could wear the

hard-earned jewelry she so obviously cared about, was not easy to come by. Too many people had to make do with seasonal work. Even Ellen, my childhood friend and now my landlady, cleaned summer cottages in the spring and closed them up after their owners returned in the fall.

Our family rented a small cottage on the shore from Ellen's father, Sam Perkins, who was my father's cousin. In those early years we could only afford to stay for a two-week vacation. Later it became a month and, this year, for the first time, my parents gone and my children grown, I had come to stay alone until my husband's arrival in August.

The daughter of a Maine carpenter, who had moved to Massachusetts to find work, I could never decide to which state I belonged, so I practiced a seasonal allegiance.

Not that I identified with the old summer families in their rambling shingled cottages on choice oceanfront lots. I played with Ellen and, each summer, we celebrated our return to Freeman's Cove with a supper of lobsters and strawberries and cream at her parents' house.

Strawberries! Suddenly the word itself, scrawled on a piece of cardboard propped against a truck, diverted my attention from the stream of midday traffic. The pickup, a yellow Toyota pockmarked with rust, had been parked in the gravel of a rebuilt curve where the road veered left.

I hadn't planned to stop here. I had intended to buy the strawberries further along at the farmstand, but I pulled over.

A little girl, who looked to be about seven or eight, came toward me. She had a slim tanned body, blue eyes and short blonde hair. "Are you selling strawberries?" I asked, looking down at her with a smile and using my best adult-to-child voice.

"They're three dollars," she said. She looked at me as if she'd never heard of being shy and she did not smile back. Her eyes were bold and her little face looked tough, like the faces of some of the Freeman's Cove children I had played with. I could see that, to her, selling strawberries was not a social transaction. It was business.

Already feeling obligated, I followed her to the open tailgate where the berries, ripe and luscious, were displayed in their baskets. A woman who had just paid for a box was nervously plucking at her berries, as if afraid she'd made a mistake and might better have chosen a different basket instead. But she left without saying anything.

The thin man leaning against the truck smoking a cigarette had a grizzled face and a short scraggly beard. He wore ancient jeans, a dark T-shirt and a red bandanna tied around his head. "Howdy," he said. "The berries in front is three dollars. Them in back is two fifty and just as good. Only they was picked yesterday."

And you want to get rid of them before tomorrow, I thought. I reached to select a box of the three-dollar berries. I imagined they gleamed redder and juicier than the two fifty ones back in the shadows.

"The two fifty ones tastes better to me," the man said. "Them's the honeydews. Only they was picked yesterday."

The little girl stood close by my left elbow, as if to monitor my decision. "You can taste them," she said, "but don't take too many."

"Go ahead," the man said. His voice was encouraging. He leaned across the boxes of berries to survey them, proud of their quality.

Hoping that none of the ash had fallen from his cigarette, I popped a honeydew into my mouth. It tasted wonderfully sweet. I followed it up with a berry from a three-dollar box. There was no contest. It wasn't nearly as good.

I chose three of the two fifty boxes. I would give one to Ellen. "Thank you for letting me try them," I said.

The man seemed content. "Them's honeydews," he said. "A real sweet berry. Only trouble is they was picked yesterday."

Our exchange over, I looked about for the little girl. I wanted to say goodbye. She came toward me from around the front of the truck holding a box of overripe berries. "These ones is rotten," she said.

Her blue eyes met mine. I told her I hoped she would sell all the others before they spoiled and she smiled at last.

I carried my berries back to the car. Out of the corner of my eye I had seen a Volvo, blood red, pull over. When I saw white pants emerge, I wedged the boxes onto the floor behind the driver's seat as fast as possible and got in. I had already been in the middle once today and I did not want to know what strawberries cost in New York.

Heading south again toward the Mount Desert hills and the cool coastal air, I let myself remember summers long past when Ellen and I were playmates and companions.

Ellen lived in a white-painted farmhouse, the old Perkins place, which stood in a field up the road from the town landing. She was a year older than me and always taller. We both had fair complexions and freckles, but mine were ubiquitous and decorated a round face, whereas Ellen's formed a light sprinkling across her nose and people said that someday she would be pretty.

The cottage we rented from her father was anchored to a granite ledge down by the shore. It had begun its existence as a boat shed. From its screened-in porch we could see everything that went on in the harbor and, after I grew up, I felt that a person could ask for nothing better than to stay there and gaze at the haphazard cluster of wharves and houses ringing the cove, or watch the boats swing on their moorings.

But when I was young I took the view for granted. I lived to climb the hill and play with Ellen and only

on the day that Lisa came to visit did Ellen demonstrate I might not always be welcome.

Lisa was twelve. I was nine. I met her one hot summer morning in the side yard of the Perkins house, where she and Ellen were lolling in the rope swings that hung from the branches of a horse chestnut tree.

When Ellen caught sight of me trudging up the driveway, her eyes narrowed. Intuitively, I slowed my approach. Her friend, Lisa, she announced, lived in Bar Harbor and was going to be staying all day.

Bar Harbor, I knew, was a grander place than Freeman's Cove. It was where the rich people lived. Even back in Massachusetts people had heard of it, though we never went there except once or twice on the fourth of July to see the fireworks.

Looking soberly at this new friend from Bar Harbor, I saw that she had dark curly hair and was not wearing old play shorts and sneakers like Ellen and me. Lisa had on white sandals and I noticed that the collar and sleeves of her shirt were edged with the same flowered material as her shorts.

She and Ellen twirled back and forth in the swings while I watched. Basically they ignored me and talked and giggled with each other until noon, when I followed them through the woodshed into the kitchen for a drink of water.

Lisa's mother was sitting in the rocking chair by the stove and Ellen's mother was at the sink hulling a box of strawberries. My mouth watered. I hoped she would ask me to stay and eat, but she did not and when the noon whistle blew I left reluctantly and reported home to my mother.

Lunch over, I headed back up the hill toward trouble. Ellen and Lisa were coming out of the driveway. Lisa was clutching a coin, which she shoved in her pocket when she saw me. I guessed they were going up the road to buy candy, or maybe a Dixie Cup, at Mrs. Kelley's grocery.

When they saw me they stopped and pretended they weren't going anywhere special. They scuffled their feet in the loose dirt on the shoulder of the road, until finally Ellen said, "What'l1 we do?...I know. There's three of us. We can play hide and seek."

Lisa said OK and Ellen looked at me. "You can be it," she said. She led us across the road to the outhouse that had served my family as a toilet until Mr. Perkins put a bathroom in the shore cottage. "Go in there," she said, "so you can't see us hide."

I was in a quandary. I did not want to be "it." I did not really like playing hide and seek. If you found a good place to hide, the searcher might get bored and go play with the people she'd already found. But, I rationalized, I would be the searcher this time and I did like Dixie Cups. Maybe afterward we would all go to the store together.

I stepped inside the outhouse and Lisa closed the door. "Count to a hundred," she said.

I began to count. At twelve I heard a click and a thump and the sound of departing feet.

Uneasy, I counted to twenty-five before pushing against the door.

It would not open. I pushed harder. "Let me out!" I yelled.

No one answered and all was still, except down on the mudflats where a seagull cackled. Inside it was dark and hot and a residual bad smell wafted up through the holes, even though the seatcovers had been nailed shut. I began to snuffle. I felt angry and frightened and humiliated at being locked in. How could they have been so mean!

I banged against the door until the hinges bounced, but they did not give way. Like everything else the Perkins men made, their outhouses were solidly built. At first I was afraid no one would remember where I was. Then I vowed I wouldn't play with Ellen ever again, even if she begged. Finally, discouraged by heat and emotion, I decided my mother would eventually miss me and come looking.

Ages later, scrunched down in the corner half asleep, I heard footsteps and voices. "We'd better let her out," I heard Ellen say.

At the sound of the metal hasp being fiddled with, I jumped up, scurrying out to blink in the bright sunlight as soon as the door came open. Ellen and Lisa stared with distaste at my messy hair and stained face. I wanted to ask them why they'd locked me in, but before I could blurt out the question Lisa tossed the stick of Spearmint gum in my direction. "Here," she said, "you can have this."

The tears welled up and, dashing between them, I escaped down the hill toward the cottage. Next day I saw where my foot had mashed the gum into the ledge.

I cannot remember if I ever told my mother what had happened. Nor do I recall if Lisa ever visited Freeman's Cove again. I only know that Ellen and I played together for the rest of that vacation, albeit a bit warily on my part, and for many summers after until we grew up and went our separate ways.

Ellen has never referred to the day Lisa came to play, which shows more self-command over an uneasy conscience than I could muster. She and her husband and sons now live in the old Perkins place. Every January I write and send her a deposit on the shore cottage and every summer I knock on her kitchen door with a box of strawberries.

She always thanks me, though once she did remark that now she supposed she'd have to take the time to run to the store for some cream before supper.

I like to think of her, bending over the kitchen sink, hulling the berries I've given her.

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