

AUBERGINE

By

Marcy Luikart

Jackie lifted a crate of Valencia oranges, the veins on her arms distended, purple blue with the weight.

“Mornin, Mornin.” That was Lucy. Lucy greeted everyone. Irrepressible Lucy of the incredible flowers was Jackie’s first friend in town and her roommate. Lucy was big, enthusiastic, loving and she collected strays. Jackie was one of her strays. Lucy had curly red hair that she kept cut short and she always wore a Dodgers baseball cap backwards. "Don't spit in the kitchen and we'll get along just fine." was what Lucy had said. Jackie never spit in the kitchen, and they got along just fine.

At Lucy's stall you could find red and yellow roses, daisies, and pink hydrangeas that were as big as Jackie’s cauliflower’s and Lucy was as exuberant as her hot pink Zinnias. Jackie could never grow flowers, they weren't practical, but she worked miracles with zucchini's and cauliflower and tomatoes; especially the small sweet cherry tomatoes that never made it to the stand because Jackie would pick them and eat them by the plantful. Even though she couldn’t grow them, Jackie loved looking at the flowers, and she was glad that they were right across from her during the day and that Lucy was there for her at night.

Jackie placed a crate of fading cauliflower next to the oranges so they'd look whiter, fresher. She loved the color of the job, the Saturday morning fair, red, white, and blue canopies, street

musicians, jugglers, hats, lots of hats, straw sun hats, stone-washed baseball caps, bandannas. She loved the concentration, the focused commitment to food. "What's fresh today?" Jackie looked at the face behind the voice. Mrs. VanHorn was a regular. She had the wonderful pink white skin that Jackie would never have. Lucy spent too many days squatting and picking in the sun, she would never have that delightful old lady skin, almost as soft as a baby's, but dry soft, fragile soft, paper-thin soft with a little pink rouge on the cheeks and white gloves. Jackie loved the white gloves. She looked at her own hands. Rough, dirt so embedded under her nails that no amount of scrubbing or orange mechanics hand cleaner could get it out. Maybe she should wear gloves, but they wouldn't be white, she thought, she'd never have white, only thick cotton worker gloves.

"Try this" Jackie picked up a broccoli, the dark green turning to a blue gray and handed it Mrs. Van Horn. "About to go to flower, but they're still good." Mrs. Van Horn took the broccoli in her gloved hand, held it to her nose, inhaled and pointed at a deep purple eggplant. "I'll take one of those instead."

Jackie loved eggplants. She'd planted her first eggplant when she was twelve. "Can I have a garden, please?" She'd nagged her mother for years. No one had a garden in her neighborhood, at least not a vegetable garden. Vegetables came from the store and vegetables consisted of frozen peas and corn. "You can have that patch over there, but don't mess up the lawn." The Lawn was brown bits of crabgrass growing in the cracked concrete where the broken recliner sat. There was a special on eggplant seeds so that's what she bought. She dug the soil and turned it over, not because anyone had told her to, it just seemed right, to make a soft bed for her seeds. Then she placed them in the dry, city dirt, poured a cup of water over them and watched. Each day she would take a cup of water out into the yard and moisten the ground that was baked hot by the summer sun,

by the heat that bounced off the red brick buildings and concrete streets. One morning she'd seen the first sprout. All day she lay on her stomach and watched it. Talked to it. Then, a few weeks later she came out and there they were. The little baby eggs. Tiny white eggs hanging on the vines. Sweet pure white eggs. She ran her finger over their smoothness. Shell-less eggs, birdless eggs.

"Jacqueleen," her mother called her in from the garden. Jackie didn't want to leave her new babies. "Jacqueleen Suzanne" her mother used the double barreled name. Jacquelyn Suzanne was her real name, the name on her birth certificate, the name her mother wanted her to grow into, the Jackleen who was someone beautiful and aristocratic who wore evening gowns and jewels and carried beaded handbags so small that nothing of any practical value could be in them. "Jackleen." Jackie went inside. Her mother was on her knees in front of the oven. "What's up?" Jackie asked. "Something smells."

"Come here, dear, I need you." Jacky felt the weight of her mother's arm around her shoulders. Her mother pulled her closer. "Help me dear." Her mother held her close and pulled both their heads into the oven. "What are we looking for?" Jackie asked, but her mother just held her closer. Jackie felt sick and dizzy. There was nothing in the oven to see except the caked on grease that no scrubbing could get rid of.

Jackie didn't put the eggplant in a bag. She handed it to Mrs. Van Dorn. Purple against white. It would do.

A blond woman with 5 even blonder children came to the stand. They reminded Jackie of those Russian Petroska dolls, each one fitting nicely in the next, a perfect progression of sizes.

The largest poked the smallest in the ribs and pointed at a tomato. Jackie moved in their direction and glared. "You have kids?" asked the mother. "No." said Jackie as she loaded up the woman's string bag with vegetables and oranges. "No" and Jackie wondered if this mother ever gathered her darlings into her arms and craved oblivion. "No."

There wasn't much left to load back in the truck, except for the broccoli that Jackie would leave at the homeless shelter. Dollar bills were bulging out of Jackie's apron pockets. Definitely a good day.

"See you at home," said Lucy.

Jackie didn't make it home until after dinner. She pulled into the driveway. The buckets of flowers were still in the back of Lucy's truck. A yellow Classic Volkswagen bug was parked in the driveway. The back seat was crammed with duffel bags and boxes. The porch light was on; Lucy always left the porch light on. They lived in a small house on three acres. Two of the acres were vertical, unlivable, unplantable land, but the remaining acre was golden. Lucy had given Jackie a patch to work her vegetable magic on.

Lucy sat at the kitchen table with a ready to burst melon pregnant girl in her early twenties, who was as red as Lucy and a very young looking man with blond dreadlocks. The Wedgwood tea service was out, and the table was filled with jam and homemade biscuits. Mrs. Van Dorn would be proud, thought Jackie.

Lucy jumped up never letting go of the young girl's hand. Lucy was radiant. "Jackie, you won't believe who's here. I can't believe who's here. Jackie this is my daughter, Summer," Lucy held summer's hand, "...and her friend." She pointed at the friend. No name. The nameless friend got up. "Well, I better be going. It was nice meeting you."

He turned to Summer. "Will you be okay?" She nodded but didn't answer. The friend left. Jackie watched him out the window. He reached into the back seat of the yellow Volkswagen pulled out an overstuffed green army duffel, threw it over by the side of the driveway and drove away.

Summer cried and Lucy held her. Jackie left them alone.

Jackie's room was in the back, behind the kitchen. She could never figure out why it had been put there, maybe it had been a big pantry or tool shed or maybe it had been the stable. But now it was her room and she loved every crack in the plaster and stain on the carpet. Jackie had her own shower, toilet and sink and the smell of jasmine permeated the air through the open window and she had stillness, and a piece of land. She didn't have much stuff and didn't need it. This was the longest she'd been in one place and it hadn't been that long, only one growing season but it was where she hung the Van Gogh print that her mother gave her, the one with the crooked bed. She pulled out her suitcase and began to pack. Everything fit into the one bag, even the sweaters and work boots. And she never forgot the black dress pumps that she'd worn to her father's funeral. She wrapped the shoes in plastic and laid them in the bottom of the suitcase.

At nineteen Jackie married Dave Delaney. She still liked thinking his name. He went off to Vietnam and never came back.

After Dave was Sam. Sam wanted kids, though and Jackie said, “No kids. Absolutely no kids, ever, never.” He hadn’t believed her, but after two abortions he gave up and left. Vegetables were her babies, sweet seedlings that she could nurse and grow, coddle. Predictable, practical and she couldn’t hurt them. She’d harvest them and leave and it was okay, it was always okay.

Jackie took the Van Gogh print down from the wall, wrapped a clean T-shirt around it and laid it on top. That was it. She stood at the door suitcase in hand, doing a final sweep of the room when the screams began. Gut wrenching screams. Jackie dropped the suitcase and ran. Summer was doubled over, a puddle of water on the floor beneath her. Lucy held Summer and told her to breathe, breathe, breathe. In out. Lucy counted. Jackie turned to leave.

“Stay, Jackie, stay.” Lucy called her back.

Baby out of the oven, baby in the oven. It was coming so fast. Summer squatted where she was and Lucy talked, counted, breathed. Summer squeezed Jackie’s arm, Jackie tried to pull away, bumped against the table. A Wedgwood teacup bounced on the floor, but didn’t break.

“It’s okay, baby, its okay, just breathe, he’s coming now, sweetie, he’s coming now.” Lucy stroked Summer’s head.

Jackie thought it was supposed to take hours or days; this baby was coming too fast. There was too much blood, too much life. She wasn’t ready, none of them were.

Jackie’s father came home and found them. By the time Jackie woke up in her own bed her mother was gone. To the hospital Jackie’s father had said but she never came back. Her mother

was sick and she died was what her father had said, that was all. He never talked about what happened that day so Jackie began to think nothing had. They moved soon after that and she hadn't stopped, for 30 years, not until she met Lucy.

But now it was time move on. She went into the bathroom and splashed cold water on her face, stared at herself in the mirror, tried to wash away the circles that weren't dirt.

She went back to Lucy's room. Lucy's eyes were open. Summer was nestled next to her and the baby was between them.

"Summer's not staying," said Lucy.

"What do you mean?" Jackie sat on the edge of the bed.

"She's leaving the baby. Going after the boy." The dreadlocks thought Jackie.

Lucy stroked the baby's head. "What do you think we should we name her?"

Jackie sat on the edge of the bed and looked at it. It was as white and delicate as a baby eggplant off the vine and it smelled as sweet as the flowering jasmine. It's lips pushed in and out sucking on an imaginary breast.

"Aubergine," said Jackie as she took a tiny finger in her hand.

"Aubergine," Lucy closed her eyes. "I like it."

Jackie watched the three of them sleep, Lucy, Summer and the Baby. Then she got up and walked down the hallway to her old room. The suitcase was still in the doorway where she'd left it. She picked it up, carried it to the bed, opened it, took out the Van Gogh and hung it back on the wall, back where it belonged.