

Strawberry Fingers

by

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Hey, do you remember those days, back when we were just babies in the strawberry fields of California? Mom or dad would plop us down in an earthy corner before going off to work picking the fruit for a living, making money so that we could live. We'd sit, immersed in strawberry plants and sunshine, eating our ways down rows of strawberries that weren't ours. Our parents would come back, tired and hungry, to find our fingers pink with juice. "Strawberry fingers!" they'd tease, and we'd giggle, tummies full of the ripe, red fruit that stained our hands. Of course, they must have been angry that we'd taken what didn't belong to us, but there was never scolding. There were just days upon days of brown earth and blue sky and red strawberries.

Do you remember when we moved to the city? Mom and dad had so many late-night talks, trying to figure how to stretch money that we didn't have. You and I laid rigidly on our backs in the rickety bed with threadbare sheets, not hearing the whispered voices end until one, two, three in the morning. I was only just beginning to tell time at that point, and you would whisper the numbers in my ear, your hot breath tickling. You, the older sister by three years, were always a little ahead, willing to teach me what you'd learned at school.

After we moved into the new apartment, grey walls and narrow hallways, you taught me what you learned on the streets with the new bunch of tough kids in the neighborhood. Then, strawberries meant the too-large, sour fruits bought for vast amounts of money in little plastic boxes at the grocery store. When I got older and joined the neighborhood kids, strawberries meant the occasional fruit stolen from the market stands on dares, rushed giggles as we clutched our thefts and scurried back to a nondescript and dusty doorstep far enough away from the offended seller to be safe. We'd stand around in the awkward skins we'd just recently found, the girls standing a distance away from the boys, and scarf down the stolen fruits. Pink stains dotted the pavement beneath our feet. We washed our hands carefully before going home, because we knew already that our parents wouldn't just laugh and tickle us, cooing "strawberry fingers" in our ears.

You and I got older. "Strawberry" meant the bright red colour of lipstick we wore to go out in the evenings when our mother warned us, "don't be too late, and stay out of dark alleys." It meant the flavour of ice cream purchased with a quarter found here or there. Sometimes you left me at the ice cream parlour, promising to come back before joining hands with an anonymous boy

and prancing off into the night in your red lips. I waited every time, and every time you came back just as I was getting worried, hair mussed and lipstick smudged. You'd wave goodbye to the boy solemnly, join hands with me, and laugh as we made our way down the lighted streets towards home.

One time, you didn't come back so early. I remember. I waited at a café table near the market that was open until late, fingernails tapping and making shadows on the shiny plastic of the tabletop. I waited until it was well past "too late," and finally you came running up to the table, tugging at your dress in an awkward manner I didn't recognize. "Let's go," you breathed hurriedly, and we walked quickly down the sidewalk. Vendors along the street tried to get our attention for their last sales of the night, shouting prices and fruit names at us as we hurried by. One vendor was selling strawberries, and I stopped to take the sample he offered before being dragged on by your insistent hands. Although I was hesitant, you assured me that one of the alleys that cut through the neighborhood to our apartment building was the best choice, and after all, we'd broken one of mom's rules already. So I followed you, my older sister, running out of the lamplight and safety into an alley with sharp, dark buildings rising on either side as if threatening to drown us in masses of rotting wood, stone and crumbling brick.

I remember how they rose out of the darkness and into my vision, a small but ominous group. They grabbed you, harsh tones issuing out of the general areas of where their mouths must have been, and I screamed for help, for somebody, for anybody. But no one was there; they'd all taken their moms' advice and hadn't stayed out so late, hadn't run down dark alleys without thinking of the dangers. Tears running down my cheeks, I rocked back and forth as they ran off, leaving you whimpering in a heap in the middle of the street. I pulled you up carefully and carried you home; even though you were three years older than me, I'd already grown taller than you and would have had no problem with your weight had I not been so scared, so shocked at what had just happened.

Finally, finally we arrived at the doorstep of our dingy apartment, a muddied and miserable spectacle, and mom looked at us with scared eyes that I hadn't seen since the days of counting money and hushed late nights. She and I laid you gently on the sheets of your bed. You moaned and I looked over before staring down at my hands; it was then that I noticed I'd been holding onto the strawberry the vendor had given me all this time, only it was mashed into pieces and the juice was running down my hands and onto the floor to make a pattern of pink in the carpet. I opened my hand and the pulpy pieces fell onto the floor, my fingers still sticky with juice. Strawberry fingers.