

ALL FRUITS ARE REBELS AT HEART

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OPEN BOOK UNBOUND WRITING

Every Friday morning, in the years before I started school, my mother and I would go to Joe Malone's Fruit and Vegetable Store.

I loved it there. The dusty chequerboard floor, the dim light, the sugary air cut with memories of sunshine and dirt. While my mother shopped, I would slowly circle the displays, nodding to the pyramids of gleaming oranges and the clouds of fresh herbs. Over time, I naturally assigned different personalities to the fruits and vegetables, understood that squashes were authoritarian, spinach was studious, that lemons were always looking to cause trouble and peaches were likely to surprise you. In fact, I developed a conviction that all fruits are rebels at heart. Those pools of juice straining to break free. I had nothing against vegetables but they were more conventional, there was no way around it, and I would smile slightly sadly at a tray of turnips that would never know adventure.

Joe Malone himself was always behind the till, chatting to customers, shouting instructions to his grandsons on the shop floor. Fruit and vegetables flowed through his hands like water, barely grazing the scales before they were totted up and stacked in brown paper bags. As my mother counted out her coins, Joe would produce a banana from below the counter and hand it to me.

'Because you've been so good in the shop,' he'd say. 'Always helping your Mammy.'

'Thank you, Mr Malone,' I'd reply quickly, never needing to be told. Because I was good and I did help my mother, who even I could see was very young and very tired at that time. But then one day, when it was hot outside and I was on my usual patrol of the shop, a crate on the floor caught my eye. It was filled with a fruit I'd never seen before, pale and ruddy like a

pink lady but bigger, with a thicker rind. I crouched down for a look then reached out and took one in each hand. They were heavy and cool. I closed my eyes, waiting for the fruit to tell me something about itself.

‘Hey!’

The voice fell from high above my head, cruel as a rock from a mountaintop. I opened my eyes. Tan shoes. White socks. Pale hairy legs.

‘Keep your little hands off the fruit.’

What was happening? A new and terrible heat was spreading from my chest. No one had ever spoken to me like this before and my belly seethed, screaming like a bucket of salted slugs.

‘Is everything alright?’

My mother’s voice. My mother’s feet. Relief bursting over me.

‘No, not really. Your child keeps pawing the fruit.’

But wait, why was he speaking to her, another adult, the same way he’d spoken to me? I looked up. He was standing very close to her. He was a lot bigger than she was.

‘I’m not sure it matters that much...’ my mother began bravely but the man scoffed and she tailed off.

‘It’s disgusting,’ he said, too quietly for anyone else in the shop to hear. And at the sound of that word – a word for flies and bins and other dirty things – something about me changed. The slugs in my gut turned angry and my hands, still holding the fruit, tightened into fists.

‘Excuse me?’ I said in my most polite voice and as the man looked down, I surged up, lifting the fruits high. My mother gasped my name, but it was too late for that, there was no stopping me. Mighty and focused as a racehorse in flight, I squeezed my eyes shut and hurled the fruits at the man’s feet. There were two wet thumps and he shouted a word I didn’t know. I opened my eyes. They had smashed and his suede shoes and my sandalled feet were spattered neon pink.

‘Aren’t you going to do something?’

He was still yelling, waving his arms to include both my mother and Joe Malone. When neither of them answered he flung down his wicker basket, spilling mushrooms and potatoes and a squash. And he must have left the shop then, though I didn’t watch him go because I was staring at the pink explosion on the floor, the bright seeds scattered like jewels. I wriggled my sticky toes and nearly laughed in astonishment at my own power. But then my mother spoke and I could hear that she was still upset.

‘I’m so sorry, Mr Malone. I can’t believe she did that.’

Joe didn’t say anything. Instead, for the first and only time I ever saw, he came out from behind his till and crossed the shop floor. I pulled back, afraid suddenly that he was going to shout at me as well. But then he bent down as low as his old knees would let him and looked into my face.

‘That fella must have been very rude,’ he said. ‘For such a small girl to make such a big throw.’

I nodded.

‘Then I’m sorry. Things like that shouldn’t happen to good children in my shop.’

I could see the worry in his faded blue eyes and I didn’t want him to be sad about it all, or Mammy either. So I squared my little shoulders and smiled.

‘I’m sorry too, Mr Malone. I didn’t know they’d make such a big mess cause I never saw one before.’

‘Never seen a pomegranate?’ Joe plucked a seed from a clean piece of skin and popped it in his mouth. ‘Well you might as well try a bit, since you’ve gone to the trouble of serving it up.’

I giggled then and turned to my mother, who was laughing too, and looking like herself again. She nodded permission and I took the biggest bit of smashed rind from the floor, sure I could feel its defiant ruby heart pulsing slightly in my hand.

‘Thank you, pomegranate,’ I whispered, and lifted it to my mouth.

Niamh Ní Mhaoileoin is an Irish writer living in Edinburgh. Her writing has appeared in publications including Gutter, the New Statesman and the Irish Times, and her novel-in-progress won the PFD Queer Fiction Prize and was shortlisted for the Discoveries prize.