Different Aisles

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DIFFERENT AISLES

The most shocking pieces of news I’ve ever received, I’ve received in grocery stores.

I’m not talking about the tabloids in the checkout lanes, or the price of avocados, or the fact that Weight Watcher’s frozen entrees have just as many calories as regular frozen meals. I’m talking about those shattering revelations that pop up in everyone’s life now and then—those shocks that one never really gets over. By some strange coincidence, mine have always seemed to occur in grocery stores.

When I was eight years old and shopping with my mother, she took me to the candy aisle and told me she and my father were getting a divorce. To quell my tears, she let me pick out any kind of candy bar I wanted. It was the last time I ever ate a Milky Way bar; they make me sick after that.

A few years later, again shopping with my mother, I ended up in a much different aisle—the “feminine products” aisle. It was here that my mother explained to me, in rather vague detail, about what it meant to “become a woman.” When she slipped one of the foreign boxes into our cart and whispered obscurely, “Kate, honey, you may be needing these soon,” I was so horrified and embarrassed that I fled the store and waited in the car while she finished the rest of the shopping.
It was also in a grocery store that Michael informed me he no longer loved me and wanted to break our engagement. The thing that really bothered me about it was that he had waited until Aisle 7 to say anything. We had already been through the spaghetti aisle, had picked up the sauce ingredients, gotten the French bread, and were in the midst of choosing just the right wine when he blurted it out. I believe he chose the grocery store on purpose, probably figuring I wouldn’t want to cause a stir in public. He was right—I didn’t. For months afterward I was haunted by the vision of me grappling with the decision of whether to buy wheat spaghetti or regular, while Michael pondered how to tell me he no longer wanted to spend the rest of his life with me.

It shouldn’t have surprised me that the next piece of shocking news I would receive would again come to me in a grocery store. This time it came from my closest friend.

We were in the Safeway produce section when Lani announced she was quitting her job, leaving her lover, and moving to California to pursue a career in acting.

I was leaning across my cart, meticulously picking out tomatoes and inspecting each one for spots, bugs, or bruises. It’s a habit of mine—I scrutinize my vegetables mercilessly. It used to drive Lani crazy. She’d complain that she could get through the entire grocery store, wait in line at the checkout counter, and take her bags to the car before I even got through produce. I’d point out that was a
slight exaggeration, and then tell her it wouldn’t be a bad idea if she were a bit more careful in choosing all that fruit she ate. She’d roll her eyes at me and tell me to hurry up. I’d tell her you can never be too careful.

When Lani told me her news I was holding a jumbo tomato up to the light, turning it in slow circles. I stopped abruptly in mid-examination to stare at her. I honestly thought I’d heard her wrong. I watched her carelessly throw two bunches of grapes into a plastic bag and toss it into the cart. She looked at me.

“Kate, for heaven’s sake, you look like I just told you I was joining a cult or something. I’m only moving.” She gave a short, gay laugh and glided over to the apples. Lani never walked places; she was always gliding or sweeping or striding. Sometimes I’d swear she was even floating.

I felt my mouth fall open as I stood there stupidly, staring after her, still holding my tomato. A small hunched woman in a green scarf, also inspecting tomatoes, bumped my elbow and peeped an “excuse me.” Startled, I hurriedly threw several tomatoes into a bag and rushed over after Lani with the cart.

“You’re joking,” I said as I approached her.

She had picked up an apple and was absently crunching on it as she scanned her grocery list. Without looking up, she said between bites, “I’m not joking.”

Lani was munching as she shopped. The fact that
this was regarded as a form of shoplifting never seemed to faze her. “I’m going to buy it, anyway,” she reasoned. “I’m hungry now.” Once she had covered the entire store eating a half a jar of dill pickles. By the time she was ready to go to the checkout counter she was so sick of pickles that she no longer wanted to buy them. So she simply recapped the jar and put it back on the shelf.

“Lani,” I said now, in what I hoped was the voice of reason, “what would you possibly do in California?” I maneuvered my cart so that I was facing her over the apple stand. Even surrounded by produce, she looked statuesque. Her dark, chin-length hair, cut to flatter her long neck, swung gently against her face on one side; on the other side it lay sleekly tucked behind her ear. Her tall, slender frame was draped in a black wool cloak—Lani’s favorite trademark, and a fashion statement which she executed perfectly, with little effort. Her wine-colored lipstick matched her blouse; her eyebrows were tweezed into flawless arches.

She glanced up from her list and said in a mildly exasperated tone, “I told you, I’m going to try acting.” Then she murmured, “Bagels . . .” and was off again, making her way smoothly down Aisle 2.

I found myself quickly becoming flustered. True, Lani had surprised me before—that was her nature—but nothing like this. Her casual attitude was enough to infuriate me. She was talking about a major upheaval in her
life—and in mine—and she was talking about it in the same way she would talk about getting new tires put on her car.

I stayed where I was at the apple stand and watched her retreat with long, confident strides—my own were not so graceful. Lani was confidence and sleekness personified—two roles that I, with my shorter frame, impossible tangle of natural curls, slight case of shyness and Reebok tennis shoes, could never quite seem to pull off.

After a few moments, when Lani turned to put something into the cart and realized it wasn’t there, she came back to where I was standing.

“Kate, really, you look sort of ridiculous just hovering over the apples like that. People will think you’re policing the produce or something.” She chuckled lightly. “Are you ever going to move? Say, those nectarines look good. How’d I miss those?” She was off on yet another tangent.

“Will you forget about the fruit?!” I blurted incredulously. “I don’t believe this! My best friend tells me she’s moving to California to go into show business, and the next thing I know she’s rambling incoherently about nectarines.” I stopped for a second, letting my shock, frustration, and dismay simmer together. “I mean, Lani, really, show business? Why not just go out and join the circus? Or maybe the Krishna-something-or-other at the airport?” My tone was becoming acidic and I knew it. Lani leveled her gaze at me, not amused.
I sighed a bit guiltily and decided to try a new approach.

“Lani, you don’t have any experience in acting. You’ve never even been in a play.”

“I have experience,” she said placidly, tucking a strand of loose hair behind her ear. She was absently picking up nectarines and putting them in the cart. She should be checking them more carefully, I thought fleetingly.

“What acting experience do you have?” I challenged her, finally leaving the apple stand and moving over to the green beans. If she could continue shopping in the midst of this, so could I.

She had to call out her answer in order for me to hear—the nectarines and green beans were at opposite ends. “Well, I had that job over Christmas one year,” I heard her say.

I almost choked. “Lani, you were an elf at the mall for three weeks! I’d hardly call that acting experience.” I uttered a short, dry laugh and began picking through the green beans, selecting only the plumpest and cleanest looking ones. A male shopper came along and, glancing at me curiously, grabbed a handful of beans, threw them in a sack and walked away. Men know nothing about the importance of vegetable selection, I thought disdainfully, and continued sorting through my beans.

Lani arrived at my side with the cart, now contain-
ing four bruised nectarines and a sick-looking watermelon.

“I can always start out in commercials,” she said to me. “Lots of big name stars started off in commercials. Once I get my big break—”

“Big break?” I snorted. “Will you listen to yourself? Do you know how many out-of-work actors are living in California waiting for that elusive big break? It’s pathetic.” The green beans were also pathetic. I moved over to cucumbers. “I mean, Lani, you have a job—”

“Kate, I hate my job. It’s so menial, so confining. I can feel myself slipping into a mindless routine; I feel a part of me dying every time I walk into that office.” She shook her head vehemently, and tiny gold bell earrings tinkled against her cheeks. “I won’t have it, Kate. I simply won’t.”

“You’re just starting out . . .” I began, but realized as soon as I spoke the words how weak they sounded. I had known for some time that Lani was growing restless in her position as research assistant; I had just been unable to figure out why. To me, working for a magazine—even a small one like the one Lani worked for—seemed glamorous and exciting. My own job title left little room for the imagination, and it made me slightly uncomfortable to know Lani had tired of her job while I was mindlessly plugging away at mine. I wondered if that meant I was in a rut; wondered if it meant I was boring.

Lani began propelling the cart out of the produce
section. This time I followed, carrying two fresh cucumbers and a green pepper.

“What does Dan have to say about all this?” I asked in Aisle 3, the canned food aisle.

Lani sighed, and I thought I saw something flicker in her eyes, but she still allowed a small, satisfied smile. “This is my decision,” she said proudly. “Dan doesn’t have any say in it.” She pushed another piece of hair behind her ear and took two cans of chicken noodle soup off the shelf. I marveled at her coolness, her casual air. My head was still spinning.

“But you and Dan are so close,” I sputtered. “I mean, we all thought you’d be married within the year! You’re just going to leave that? Leave him?” I had stopped in the middle of the aisle, right in front of the canned peas. I couldn’t believe this. I couldn’t believe any of it.

“I don’t love Dan anymore,” Lani said, and I pictured wheat spaghetti.

“Have you ever just felt like you were meant for something else?” Lani went on, taking four cans of fruit cocktail off the shelf and dropping them into the cart. Lani ate fruit cocktail all the time, despite my proclamation that it was sugar laden and should be consumed sparingly. She never bought the canned fruit that comes packed in water — it was always the kind with the thick syrupy goo.

“You think you were meant for moving to Califor-
nia and becoming an actress?” I asked doubtfully as we moved to Aisle 4. “I never realized that elf stint had such an effect on you.”

Lani was a few steps ahead of me with the cart. She didn’t slow or turn around, but said over her shoulder, “I just think I was meant to try.”

For a moment I was afraid I had hurt her feelings, but as I observed her from behind I realized she was fine—she had made up her mind. I could tell by the straight way she held her shoulders beneath her black cloak and the determined way she shoved the grocery cart in front of her. She had made up her mind to turn her life upside-down, and I was powerless to stop her.

Numbly, I moved through Aisle 4 without a word. A woman stationed at the corner offered Lani and me samples of frozen pizza—Lani accepted heartily and ended up throwing three pizzas into the cart. I declined the sample, not sure how long those little triangles of pizza had been sitting out.

We were approaching the dairy aisle when Lani spoke again.

“I just feel vacant,” she said matter-of-factly. “I must look like an empty warehouse on the inside—merchandise all boxed up and ready for shipping.” She stepped around a woman who was busy chastising her whining child, and reached for a carton of eggs.

“I mean,” she continued, “haven’t you ever done
something just because you wanted to do it? Life is so short.” She carefully placed the carton of eggs in the cart and looked at me, her steady eyes searching my face.

“You’re only 26,” I muttered. “Not exactly over the hill.”

“Oh, Kate, you know what I mean,” Lani countered, exasperated again.

I thought for a minute. Had I ever done anything just because I wanted to do it? Just to feel the elation of taking a chance and seeing it work out? What if this really worked out for Lani—what if she had a chance here to be happy? And how many chances had I missed, simply because I had been too frightened to take a risk here and there? There were so many things to consider when making choices. Consequences, for one thing. There were consequences for everything.

Lani was still looking at me, waiting for me to say something. Finally I said, “I took a chance with Michael because I wanted to. I wanted that relationship. Does that count? God, and look what happened.” I winced.

Lani beamed. “But that’s the point, Kate,” she said. “Sometimes things don’t turn out so well. In fact, sometimes they’re a complete flop.” Here she gave a gentle, knowing laugh and reached to squeeze my hand affectionately. “But don’t you see it’s the attempt that counts? It’s the conscious decision to take an active role in your own life. I have to try this, Kate. I have to take this chance like
you had to take a chance with Michael, and like you’re going to have to take again if you ever want to move forward.”

She gave my hand another squeeze, then turned and began pushing the cart toward the checkout lane. As she walked away from me, her cloak swirling gracefully behind her, the thought struck me that she would make a wonderful actress. She had all the glamour, style and confidence to do it—I didn’t know why it had never occurred to me before. But then, there were a lot of things that had never occurred to me before, and I had the distinct feeling—standing in the Safeway dairy aisle, next to the eggs—that those same things would occur to me again.

Lani was almost to the end of the aisle when I called after her. “Uh, Lani, wait!”

She turned.
“Are you going to check those?” I asked.
She looked puzzled.
“The eggs,” I said. “You forgot to check the eggs. Some of them may be cracked or rotten or something.”
She shook her head no. She didn’t want to check them.

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