

Saturdays and Cowboy Hats

Every Saturday morning all summer long, the parking lot across the street from me is transformed. Friday night, it's full of sports cars and sparsely moustached, beer-guzzling boys with cell phones and car stereos that shake the glass in my front windows, but come Saturday morning at eight, it's a farmer's market. There is the fey fella selling homemade dog biscuits, the family-run fireweed honey corporation, the lesbian cheese makers from Saltspring Island, a grumpy potter, and a sunburnt man selling bundles of organic mustard greens and butter lettuce. You can buy cherries and maple syrup, visit the latte wagon, and get gardening advice. You can sign petitions and join a jam-making group that donates to the food bank. There are face painters and banjo players. People wear sandals and the dogs rarely get into fights, because everyone is too busy saying hello and showing off their new bedding plants. Yard sales spring up spontaneously on street corners.

All of this appeals to the increasingly not-so-latent hippie in me. I mean, I still like to wear shoes in the city and I wholeheartedly believe in the frequent washing of one's clothing, but there is still something of the small-towner in me – I like to know my neighbours, I like to meet the guy who picked the cherries I'm about to eat.

I usually throw on a pair of jeans and take the dogs with me. We always complete a loop around the lake before we hit the market, to avoid any unsightly squatting in the middle of the town square.

I saw them getting out of a late model minivan, a young, slender mother and her maybe six-year-old kid. She was in a wind-blown dress that wrapped around her legs, the kid in blue cords with frayed cuffs, a red and yellow striped T-shirt, and now colourless canvas sneakers. The mom had a canvas shopping bag over her shoulder and the kid had a comic book rolled up and pushed into the back pocket of his cords.

Loose End

“Mom, lookit the little dog, he’s sooo wee. . . .” The little boy bent down to pet my Pomeranian, and his mom stood up straight and slammed the door of the minivan shut.

“Olivia, you have to ask the man if the dog is friendly before you touch it. Maybe it doesn’t like little girls.”

I looked at the kid again, and she stared back up at me. Her hair was straw yellow, and cut short. She had one hand on her hip, her elbow resting on the comic in her back pocket. The knees of her cords were worn and grass-stained. One shoelace was hanging untied, flattened, and muddied. The only things about her that matched her name were two tiny stud earrings, dark blue and sparkling, out of place with her tomboy face.

I wondered if Olivia got her ears pierced to make Olivia happy, or her mom. Maybe her grandma took her to the salon in a last-ditch feminine attempt to make up for the striped T-shirts and dirty knees.

“She’s not a mister, Ma.” Olivia spoke matter-of-factly, rolling her eyes back like kids do when their parents say dumb things. “So can I pet your dog, or what?”

I nodded, struck as dumb as her mother. I couldn’t make my mouth work, and there were tears in my eyes. I wanted to show Olivia my new fishing rod; I wanted to build her a tree fort with a rope ladder. I wanted to make her a belt with interchangeable brass buckles and teach her how to perfect her wrist shot. I wanted to play street hockey with a tennis ball, and get headaches from eating our Slurpees too fast.

I wanted to pass her a note written in pencil on a piece torn from a brown paper bag that said: YOU ARE NOT THE ONLY ONE. AND ONE DAY EVERYTHING WILL BE FINE, I PROMISE YOU THAT. OH, AND LEARN A TRADE YOU CAN FALL BACK ON.

Olivia’s mom stood next to me on the sidewalk. “She really loves little dogs. She’s always begging to get one, but we live in a one-bedroom apartment.”

Goliath was flat on his back now, all four legs in the air, working the cute angle. Olivia was scratching his belly with both hands.

Saturdays and Cowboy Hats

“Come on, honey, we have to shop. You’ve got karate at noon. Say goodbye.”

Olivia jumped up, wiping her hands on her faded red and yellow shirt. She looked me up and down. Her eyes rested unabashedly on my dusty workboots, then my jeans, my Snap-On Tools belt buckle, the wallet in my back pocket, my black T-shirt, naked earlobes, and freshly shorn hair. She chewed her gum slowly on one side of her mouth and hooked her thumb through an empty belt loop.

“Thanks fer lettin’ me pet him. He’s real cute, huh? What’s his name?”

“Goliath.” I could still barely talk, I was still afraid the tears were going to spill over my bottom lids. I wanted her to remember me as being tall and dry-eyed, just in case I was the first one of her people she had met so far.

“It was really nice to meet you, Olivia.” I extended my hand, and she shook it, her face deadly serious. Her mother nodded a polite goodbye. Olivia just kept shaking my hand.

“One more thing . . .” she said, squinting up at me, the sun bright over my shoulder, “I need to know, where’d ya get that cowboy hat?”