So-So Grocery

By Michael Spence

—New Orleans, 1963

The address—5050 Downman Road—
I guess inspired Mom to call it that.
The pocked cinderblock felt gritty when I dragged
My fingers along a wall, as if the store
Were painted with a paste of crumbled seashells.
Whiter than its milk that would go bad
Before we finished it, the building gleamed
Bright as a bunker from an arctic war.
But inside wasn’t cool—just not as hot
As the steam of this July. Maybe the milk
Soured my mother on the place. She claimed
The meat it sold developed unusual hues
And started to smell soon as she’d unwrap it.
So she drove to the Piggly-Wiggly, its cold breeze
Flowing past the bins that glittered like ice.

The So-So owner loved the holidays—
All the holidays. Equality
Was rare as snow that summer in the South:
The people living there knew people came
In different kinds. But in the display window,
The Uncle Sam who held a firecracker
Big as an extinguisher stood guard
With Santa smiling beside an aluminum tree
Flocked into permanent winter. A turkey stuck
Mid-strut between them like a mutual pet
Seemed to peck a patch of jack-o’-lanterns.
In front of all, as if in command, the crèche.

My mother frowned: He’s just too lazy to change
With the seasons. So confused and weird. Nodding,
I fought to keep from grinning. I thought the owner
Was right—holidays seemed parceled out
As if scarce as pardons from the governor
On TV crime shows. I guessed the owner felt
Excited like I did on Christmas morning,
And he could feel that electric every day—
His store would never cease to celebrate.

I first saw Michelle Fernandez in its aisles,
Her hair and face the light brown of pralines.
I bought a couple of Yoo-hoo’s for me and her—
They were cold; so chilly they made us shiver.
The frosty drinks cost most of my allowance,
But I liked imagining the chocolate turned
Michelle browner. Those summer afternoons
We’d meet at the store and take our bottles out
To the bench in front. I sipped mine slowly
To make it last. The day I said, I want you
To be my girlfriend, she only smiled and talked
About how hot it was.

So-So Grocery
Never changed when autumn came and Michelle
Went out with Ronnie Ducrose. I’d still go in
To check the aisles; any brown-haired girl
Turned blond or brunette. I quit looking
At the window and its frozen decorations.
The cream soda I bought looked plain as water—
The way a holiday on the calendar
Looks like any other day. I chugged
The hissing fizz, letting it fill up my mouth,
And pressed my lips tight as it scoured my tongue.

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