

The Shopping Queen

By Autumn Williams
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She called me beautiful. As I backed my cart up to let her pass, she breezed by and, with an eye-crinkling smile, said, “Thank you, beautiful.” Suddenly, I am pulled from my mindless shopping stupor and, for a fleeting moment, I am face to face with my future. Although a mask blocked her lips, I saw a smile in her cloudy eyes. Her irises sparkled with mirth; the edges crinkled and wrinkled and ebbed and flowed. It was as if she knew that her comment had just awakened me. Where others might have simply passed with a nod or a quick grin, she chose to shine all her love and reassurance on me, if only for a second.

We traveled in opposite directions. It would have been a head-on collision if one of us had not wavered. I inched out into the hustle and bustle of the market like a newly licensed driver. No one paused or hesitated for me. However, when she stepped out, traffic was at a standstill. She commanded respect. The seas parted as the other shoppers and I rolled backward and stepped sideways. We made way for the regal elder, hoping to gain favor and possibly even a smile. For some reason, I was the only one she acknowledged.

A few aisles later, I got to study her again. She and I had two different styles of shopping, an expert and an apprentice. Her shopping cart held eggs and butter and a bevy of fruits and vegetables. Perhaps she planned to make a cake or a pie to celebrate a grandchild’s graduation or a friend’s birthday. Maybe she baked because she could. She wanted to enjoy and indulge. My cart consisted of a box of cereal, a salad, chicken legs, a few apples, and a loaf of bread. I had no exciting plans in my future, communal or otherwise. Although I clumsily navigated the aisles of the store, knocking over boxes and bags, she glided with sure feet, occasionally pausing to peruse the shelves and grab an item or two. I debated flavors, cuts, and brands; she reached with sure hands, moving with the expertise of a chef. She was trained by her mother, mother’s mother, and ancestral women back to the beginning of time. I was trained to shop, but still in the stages of “look but do not touch.” I moved with the competence of a young adult, familiar but not friendly when it came to the shelves around me.

I glanced at my phone, scrolling on an app to make sure I did not forget a need or want. She checked off a list in her head. She was a veteran, accustomed to spying sales and spikes, beaming at a BOGO sign and tsking at a pack of beef. I was only a customer, grabbing items with a sigh and hoping that the bill was not astronomical. In the outside world, she might have been forgotten or blended in with everyone, but she was royalty in the grocery store that morning. Her temples were speckled with white and gray, a sharp contrast against her mocha skin. Her outfit of choice was a chestnut shirt paired with kobicha pants and taupe sneakers. She had an air of effortless chic. She knew she looked good.

I was left marveling, my mouth fixed to catch flies. Did she plan the color combination, or did she roll out of bed and grab the pieces? I have never been able to pull off the monotone look. How did she execute it so flawlessly? I wore only blue jeans and white sneakers with sweatshirts of alternating colors. I admired her tenacity and sense of

style. If our interaction had been longer, I might have asked for some style advice. She was an icon, and I needed a few tips.

On that day a month ago, we were two ships passing in the morning sun. Although I shop at the same store at the same time every week, I have not seen her since. I still do not know how she managed to see behind the sweatshirt, jeans, and masks, to see me. Perhaps she solely relied on our shared skin tone or similar hairstyles. Perhaps she knew I was a student and admired my aspirations. Perhaps she simply saw herself in me—a mirror reflecting the past, present, and future. She called me beautiful.