

Apricots

On a road trip, forty minutes could feel like an eternity. Especially in the backseat of Mom's minivan. Especially when we were leaving behind annoying cousins, Dad's constant complaints about the heat, and boring family dinners. I couldn't wait to be home. Faith was already asleep next to me, so I tried to busy myself watching the fields roll past.

As often as we drove through the central valley of California and its endless rows of grapes, tomatoes, and almond trees, it was impossible not to get lost in the uniformity. I played a game, fixated on the straight lines of vegetation. With a quick shift of my eyes, I could alternate between watching the rows as if they were marching past me, to seeing *them* statue-still as *I* flew by. Sometimes I'd spy a bird in the fields with a berry in its beak. Other times, people were picking the produce as we drove carelessly past. Even when I saw nothing noteworthy, watching the lines of crops transfixed me.

"Apricot Farm!" Dad startled me as we whizzed past plywood on the side of the road.

"Ooooh," Mom murmured. Apricots were her favorite. I liked summer fruits too, but never understood why she loved apricots specifically. They were small and ugly. They weren't that tasty or juicy. Apricots lacked the sumptuousness of a peach, the luscious flavor of a nectarine, or the sparkling jewel tones of a black plum. They were just okay.

"Let's go back," Dad offered. "We have time."

I rolled my eyes, but before I could argue, Mom pulled off to make a U-turn.

"Where are we?" Faith mumbled, suddenly awake.

"About to stop at an apricot farm," Dad said.

"Yum!" She instantly perked up. I slumped in my seat.

The van lurched as it drove over the gravel road. Leafy trees lined our view, with sprays of branches and clumps of heavy golden fruit. They might have been planted in meticulous rows, but the trees had a wild look to them in the breeze. Bushel baskets had been placed at intervals within the rows, with imperfect apricots tossed in. A few workers were scattered throughout, holding smaller baskets and gathering fruit. I craned my neck and spotted a small orange cat loping through the grass. It was the first time I'd seen an orchard up close.

We parked at the end of the road, next to a white house with peeling paint. As we all piled out of the van, a man in jeans ambled out to meet us. I clenched my teeth. Another person meant we'd be here all day. Sure enough, Dad took the lead, elaborating on our discovery and decision to stop. The stranger offered to take us on a tour. Faith nodded eagerly, and hid behind Mom when the stranger laughed. Mom patted her shoulder but I could see she was just as excited.

The man led us through his farm while Dad chatted to him at the front of the pack. He gestured to the rows, revealing the difference between Earlicots and Goldriches. My sister leaned into the closest bushel basket, inspecting the green fruits that fell early.

"You can try one," the farmer chuckled. When she bit into the yellowish fruit, she grimaced and spat it back out in the grass. Mom laughed and followed her to the bushel, picking out two apricots the color of poppies.

"Maybe this one instead," she offered, handing one to Faith. She tore into it eagerly. "Want to taste?" She turned to me, holding out the other fruit. I turned my nose up, so she took a bite instead.

"Over here is where the old grove is," said the stranger. These trees had gnarled trunks

and seasons of experience. As he went on about how special these old ones were and all the fruit they'd given, Dad nodded along and Faith inspected the grass. I watched as Mom walked to the nearest tree, running her fingertips over the bark. When she caught me looking, she called me over.

"Jewel, I bet you're still small enough to climb one." She spoke quietly, but I heard the mischief in her voice. Before I could reply, Dad was calling our attention to follow the farmer. So we did, Faith falling behind as she collected tiny flowers. Mom strode forward to ask a question, leaving me with my sister.

"Why are you grumpy?"

"I'm not!" I snapped. "I just want to go home."

"Oh."

"Do you even like apricots?"

"Yeah," she grinned. "What's not to like?"

I knew that if everyone else had heard, they'd be in stitches.

When we reached the house again, I went to ask Mom for the keys, so I could wait in the car. The adults had reached the back of the house before we had, and lined up by the back porch. Mom and Dad were holding hands while the farmer talked.

"Whoa!" Faith exclaimed as she traipsed up. On the porch lay huge flat racks, covered with apricot halves. They shone in the light like huge beads of honey. Some were plump with nectar, and others had already shriveled in the California heat.

Mom crouched next to Faith, explaining that this was how they dried the fruits. As my sister began sampling them, Mom turned to me.

"Everything all right?"

“Yeah. I just want to be home already.”

“Me too,” she said. “Down here used to be my home, you know.”

“Why do you like apricots so much?” The words tumbled out of my mouth. “They’re not even that good.”

“Well, to me, they taste like when I was a little girl.”

I frowned. Obviously apricots wouldn’t taste any different nowadays.

“Try one,” she offered, passing me one of the dried halves. I popped it in my mouth.

Mom was right. It tasted like bike rides and corduroy shorts and freckles.

“Good, huh?”

I nodded. “What’s not to like?”