

THE MOMENT OF DECISION

Leona stood in the supermarket near the tomatoes. Several people were staring at her. Someone from the coffee clutch seemed to be snickering. The clerk had put up many signs: Ponderosa. June Pink. Marglobe. German Johnson 1. German Johnson 2. If angels have sweethearts, mused Leona, I want mine to be a produce-man. A slight thought occurred to her. She could stab herself with a carrot right there in the aisle. Then St. Peter would produce her produce-man instantly. But now she must think about choosing a tomato.

It was easy to choose mayonnaise. You just opened the jar and stuck in your finger and tasted. But from childhood Leona had preferred horseradish. A big snort of horseradish made her feel like one huge nose. Leona could get off on horseradish while other people just stood around drooling and looking frigid. She had once talked her little friend Hortense into snorting horseradish with her on the back porch. Hortense reported it made her buns burn at potty time. Hortense's mother told her never to speak to her naughty friend again. Now Leona was feeling a surge of energy from the memory of this friendship. She lifted her right arm and ripped off a plastic bag from the roll, taking one extra for a bonnet, as the rain had begun outside. The moment of decision had come. Leona stepped toward the tomatoes.

It was late, and she knew she should be home. But horseradish alone on pumpernickel did not seem just right. Maybe if it were red, she thought. She pondered the tomatoes. German Johnson 1. Marglobe. German Johnson 2. Ponderosa. Big Boy. Better Boy. German Johnson 3. June Pink. It was impossible to choose -- even with produce-men looking over her shoulder, smiling like the sweethearts of angels. Then Leona's right eye began to rove toward the orange bin. Only one brand. Indian River. From Florida. That settles it, she thought. Picking up one Indian River orange, one bottle of slow flowing ketchup, one half-loaf of pumpernickel, one cafeteria sized container of horseradish, and one jar of mayonnaise -- just tasted, Leona pushed her cart out the door and down South Street, thinking of her orange tomato sandwich. No one could step up and accuse her of having failed in her moment of decision, not even Hortense, who long ago had gone from potty to pot and smiled at everyone all day long.

-- William Harrold

Milwaukee WI