

## **In Praise of the Outer Aisles**

When it comes to buying produce, I head to the farmers' market. I bypass the grocery stores with their fluorescent lights and canned music, their fruit transported from Australia and pyramided under special lights to make the oranges look orange.

Instead, I direct my feet to the outer aisles, where the air is fresh and the music is live—guitar, violin, a Bluegrass singer. I hand my money directly to the farmer in exchange for plump strawberries harvested that morning near the ocean, and organic grapes the size of thumbs. I wander the stalls of fresh flowers, crackly baguettes, giant artichokes, seven varieties of hummus, and sweet baby corn eaten raw, there in the sunlight, among a community of friends.

In a small notebook, I jot down the farmer's tips:

“Take a clove of garlic and plant it in an inch of soil on Halloween. The rain will water it, and come spring it will sprout beautiful flowers. You'll have garlic year-round.”

I show him the leaves that have turned yellow on my tomato plant.

“Is the fruit ripe?” he says.

“The skins are splitting on the vine,” I say.

“Too much water, too fast.”

“Some of the fruit is still green,” I say.

“Needs fertilizer. At this point, use nitrogen and magnesium.”

The clerk in the grocery store has no idea how the tomatoes he stocks are harvested. “I wouldn't know, ma'am. Our tomatoes are shipped from Mexico. We pick ‘em off the truck.”

I'm happier in the outer aisles, the sunlight warm on my skin. Children laugh, older couples smile. I carry a reusable cloth bag spilling over with bouquets of red and orange and yellow cosmos, thick gluten-free cinnamon rolls, homemade lavender soap, and raisins so plump they squirt when you bite into them.

The raisins in the grocery store rattle around in their miniature boxes like old teeth.