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No Organic Allowed

FICTION BY LISA SINNETT

“Mami! Look at me!” Gabriela, wearing a red snow suit is making a tiny snow angel on the sidewalk. “Soy una angelita!”

“Make another one sweetie!” Elisa kneels in front of the baby’s carseat carrier, pulls off her glove and runs her finger along Grace’s cheek. No hint of frostbite. Grace’s amber eyes regard Elisa without blinking.

Elisa picks up her shovel and imagines they are upstairs, watching the snow from the living room. Being on the fourth floor blocks out most of the street noise, and the giant oak that grows almost up to the window makes it seem as if they are in another kind of world, softer and more alive than the one they live in most of the time.

But she has to keep shoveling and they have to go out. She’s been waiting for the fifteenth of the month so she can redeem her WIC coupons. They’ve been living on almond cookies, beans, and iced tea for two days. The twelve inches of snow, Detroit’s first blizzard of the New Year, is just the latest obstacle.

“There. That should do it.” The Mazda’s back end is smashed in, and the insurance policy hasn’t been paid in four months, but the 626 is hers and it is no longer buried in a snow drift. After she clips the girls into their seats, Elisa pulls her sopping gloves off and searches her pockets for the screwdriver.

“There you are.” She spends so much time with the little ones, she’s taken to speaking to objects. She does her special magic, twisting the screwdriver’s flat head into the gaping ignition, and works on her sound effects to get the girls to laugh.

“Vroom! Vroom!”

She checks the rearview mirror. Gracie's new Winnie-the-Pooh hat from Auntie Elena is slipping down over one eye again, but Gracie's other eye is bright and Elisa can see her teeth. Gracie loves the car.

"Vroom! Vroom!" Gabriela is holding her puff pink plastic steering wheel and smiling. "I'm driving, Mami!"

Elisa pulls the car forward a few feet. "Just one second nenas." She hops out and pulls a yellow vinyl kitchen chair from the sidewalk into her cleaned out parking spot. "I hope nobody moves that chair."

Elisa fishtails the car down Vinewood Street and takes a left on Vernor Highway, with its deep tire tracks. The Mazda slides into the grooves like it's lining up for a car wash. Elisa pats her pocket for her WIC booklet. It's there, a grey folder in its plastic sheath. Because of this government program, she can get milk, cereal, juice, cheese, beans, carrots, peanut butter, and some tuna fish. With the giant bag of rice, green tea, and almond cookies that cousin Chilo lifted from the Chinese restaurant where he works, Elisa calculates she can make it until her husband's next unemployment check.

She believed him when he said he was coming home for Navidad, but here it is, already the New Year.

Julio is not going to come home, she knows.

If it weren't for Chilo coming by every two weeks to help Elisa fill out Julio's unemployment papers and forge Julio's signature, she'd be in trouble. But even as she thinks this, another thought comes.

"El Buen Pastor is giving out food boxes for \$15." She heard someone say it, maybe Lupe. But when? Which day? Better to keep her mind on the road.

The parking lot has been plowed, but the spaces are still covered in snow. She hustles in with the girls before the homeless woman has a chance to beg from her. What would she give her? A coupon for Juicy Juice?

Grace's car seat takes up almost the whole shopping cart, and Gabriela's feet barely fit through the holes of the toddler seat. Elisa considers herself an expert at following the WIC rules. Gabriela helps now: she points at the green Juicy Juice bottle with the apples on it and claps. Elisa navigates the aisles, pushing the cart with one hand, tucking food around Grace, double-checking against the WIC brochure that what she is getting is allowed. She doesn't want to miss a thing. "Meat! Meat! Meat!" Gabriela chants as Elisa speeds past the butcher counter. "No baby, not today." She steers the cart up to the checkout.

"Ma'am, you can't buy that cheese." The clerk's star-spangled acrylic nail is tapping the WIC card. "See, it says right here. *No organic allowed.*" She slides the folder across to Elisa with a flick of her nail.

"But, it's on sale, it's the same price as the regular cheese."

The clerk stares at Elisa, blows a pink gum bubble and then flips a switch. The light above the cashier station starts to flash.

Bob the manager is behind the bulletproof glass; it takes him a while to come out.

"Ma'am. You can switch the cheese or pay for it." He points to the brochure. "See? *No organic allowed.* We can't ring that up."

“Mami, pee pee.” Gabriela says.

“I guess I could switch it, but, it’s the same price as the other.”

The line behind her is four deep now. A woman with stark black roots and the protruding false pregnancy of middle age glares.

“Jesus Christ,” the woman spits. She’s holding two loaves of Wonder Bread and a single gallon of milk. “Can’t we move this along?”

The manager and the gum-smacking cashier examine Elisa’s order.

“What kind of juice is that?” They squint at the WIC folder, with its kindergarten bright pictures of permissible foods.

They go through each item on the belt, matching the coupons with the folder item for item, except for one eight-ounce block of organic cheese. If Elisa doesn’t get the right kind of cheese, she’ll have to pay cash for it, and they’ll take the coupon anyway. She needs her three dollars to put some gas in the tank.

The line is moving up. Elisa can feel the woman’s breath almost in her ear. “Jessie,” the manager says “go switch this cheese. We got to get this line moving.” Jessie rolls her eyes and saunters toward the dairy section.

“Mami! Pee Pee!” It’s no longer a warning. The smell of urine reaches Elisa’s nose, but there’s nothing to be done. Gabriela is crying and Gracie’s hat has slipped down over her eyes.

“Let’s fix that.” Elisa takes the hat off. Gracie’s hair is plastered to her head with sweat. Jessie comes back and slaps the cheese down on the conveyor belt.

It seems that Bob has registered Elisa’s tired eyes and the girls’ discomfort for the first time.

“Next time remember. No organic anything. It says so right on the folder. Save you some time.” He could have said: “Waste less of everybody’s time,” but he doesn’t.

It’s twilight and it’s snowing again.

“Okay, nenas, one more car trip. Look at the snow!”

“Ooooooh.” Gabriela must be uncomfortable in her wet pants, but she doesn’t complain. Turning onto Vernor Highway takes a long time, but finally they are on their way home, just a mile to go. Elisa noses the Mazda onto Vinewood Street.

Officer Mendoza is off-duty and her truck is idling next to Elisa’s spot. Elisa sees her throw the kitchen chair into a chesthigh snowdrift. She climbs back into her truck and puts it into the space that Elisa had spent the afternoon shoveling out.

“Hey!” Elisa puts the car in neutral, leans over and opens the passenger door. Officer Mendoza rolls down her window.

“What.” It’s a challenge.

“Look, that’s my parking space. I just shoveled it out.”

“This is a public street. You can’t reserve a public space.”

“Oh, come on now,” Elisa appeals. “I’ve got the babies and the groceries to carry in.”

Officer Mendoza leans closer. “What’s wrong with your ignition? Is that a stolen car?”

“No! I have the key!” She does. She uses it to lock the door.

“Forget it.” Elisa leans over and shuts the door. She finds parking at the end of the block, in front of the abandoned apartment building. The snow is untouched, so Elisa guns the motor and plows in. God knows how long it will take to get the car out tomorrow. Maybe she’ll just leave it there for a few days and wait for the snow to melt.

“Hey, Gabriela, we’re home, come on out.” Gabriela climbs out into thigh high snow and waits for Elisa to pull out the car seat. It occurs to Elisa that clipping and unclipping, zipping and unzipping, carrying and unloading measure much of her life. She’s all but forgotten that there are spaces in between.

The night has completely fallen now, and the snow has cleaned the city with the ease of making a bed with line-dried sheets in midsummer. The homeless men, usually drinking and shouting at passers by are gone, probably squatting in the vacant Varsity Hotel. All is still. Elisa never noticed the pine before, its smell is inviting, ever-green branches laden with their burden of snow. It’s in the shadow of the abandoned hotel, on Detroit’s most southwest, most industrial, most polluted corner, but it is still living, growing, and rooted in its own space. Elisa picks up Grace’s car carrier and takes Gabriela’s hand. The streetlight creates a halo of snow, illuminating the outline of the sidewalk ahead; just enough light to get home.

LISA SINNETT is from Detroit, Michigan. Her writing has been recognized by Friends Journal, Glimmertrain, HipMama, and Penduline Press. She taught in the Detroit Public Schools for twenty years, and now works with young families in Southwest Detroit.